

THE RELEVANCE OF IMPARTIAL NEWS IN A POLARISED WORLD

A report by JV Consulting commissioned
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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	2	Opinion and comment	31
FOREWORD	3	Explainers and fact-checks	34
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5	In Summary: Journalism in practice	35
INTRODUCTION	8	4. The tensions of impartiality in different news topics	39
Aim and objectives	8	Science and the problem of false equivalence	39
Methodology and sample	8	Politics and the problem of omission and suppression	41
Countries researched.....	9	Social justice and different audience views	43
News stimulus	9	Market plurality.....	45
A note about the fieldwork period.....	10	In Summary: The tensions in different news topics.....	45
MAIN FINDINGS	12	5. Impartiality and news audiences	49
1. What is impartiality?	12	Audience differences	49
A complex concept	12	Four news mindsets.....	49
The layers of news	13	In Summary: Impartiality and news audiences	51
An impossible ideal.....	15	6. Building trust by addressing risks to impartiality	53
In Summary: What is impartiality?.....	16	Topic, source, brand	53
2. Impartiality and the affordances of media sources and formats	18	Balancing risks to impartiality	54
Television and radio.....	18	In Summary: Building trust.....	55
Newspapers and their websites.....	19	CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLISHERS	57
Social media	20	APPENDIX	61
News aggregators.....	21	Digital News Report 2021 impartiality questions and data	61
Podcasts and YouTube videos.....	21	Methodology and sample design	63
In Summary: The affordances of media sources and formats	22	Homework tasks	64
3. Impartiality and journalism in practice	26	Country stimulus packs.....	65
Language and headlines.....	26		
Formality and informality	28		
Display of emotions	30		

FOREWORD

Nic Newman, Senior Research Associate, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

Most people agree that news organisations and journalists should reflect all sides of an issue and not push a particular agenda – at least when asked about it in surveys. Our 2021 *Digital News Report* finds this to be true across countries and age groups¹. But we also know from our research that many people feel that the media often fail to live up to this ideal of impartiality.

Our surveys consistently show that committed partisans believe that media coverage is unfair, especially in countries where debates about politics or social justice have become deeply polarised. In the United States, right wing audiences see outlets like the *New York Times* and MSNBC as deeply untrustworthy, while liberal audiences have a similar opinion of Fox News or Newsmax². Meanwhile, in the UK, public service brands such as BBC, ITV and Channel 4 are attacked increasingly from both left and right.

Some of this may have been fuelled by the rise of online and social media, which has arguably encouraged extreme opinions and partisan news outlets to challenge traditional outlets. But at the same time, parts of the traditional media have become more focused on strong and distinctive opinion as a response to a more crowded and competitive media landscape³.

Television news in the United States, as one example, has become increasingly polarised since the abandonment of the fairness doctrine in the 1980s. In the UK, opinion-led news channel GB News, with its mission to ‘counter the liberal and metropolitan bias of established news outlets’, is also raising challenges to traditional notions of impartial and objective news⁴.

With more people accessing news via search and social media the ‘impartiality of the algorithm’ has become a topic of hot debate too. And the shift to digital media has also raised new questions about how journalists should conduct themselves in more informal settings, such as social media and podcasts.

Some commentators are increasingly questioning the value of objective and impartial news in a world where people have ready access to news from so many different points of view. Others argue that an obsession with balance or ‘both-sidism’ has given extreme or unrepresentative views undue prominence, helping to legitimise climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers amongst others⁵.

¹ Averaged across 46 countries, 74% agree that they still prefer news that reflects a range of views and lets *them* decide what to think. Most also think that news outlets should try to be neutral on every issue (66%). Relevant data from the *Digital News Report* is referenced in the Appendix of this report.

² Reuters Institute *Digital News Report 2021* and *2020*

³ <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay.html>

⁴ <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/gb-news-launch-date-tv-channel-andrew-neil-new-when-start-latest-news-947550>

⁵ James O’Brien, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/media/2018/03/media-impartiality-problem-when-ignorance-given-same-weight-expertise>

But defenders of impartiality point to a continuing need for unbiased news that fairly represents different viewpoints in a world where extreme opinions, bias and misinformation is more available than ever. They worry that the trend towards opinion-driven partisan news outlets and popularity-driven algorithms in social media is encouraging echo chambers and pushing communities apart.

But how do audiences think about out these issues? In this research commissioned from JV Consulting and Hope + Anchor, we aim to get beneath the surface of this complex subject to understand more about impartiality today in a variety of different contexts and across four countries with different media systems: the UK, Germany, Brazil and the United States.

Using a deliberative and reflective approach, including diaries and discussion groups, the researchers have explored how views are affected by the subject matter, and by the different sources and formats of news. There is also an exploration of the link between impartiality and trust. And in these pages, you'll also find some helpful frameworks and models for understanding the different dimensions of this complex subject.

Not all news organisations are committed to impartiality: indeed, some make a virtue of creating news and opinion with a clear point of view. At the same time, the findings in this report about how audiences think about the issues, about the link between impartiality and trust, and the need to clearly label commentary and opinions, will be relevant to all companies looking to navigate their way through this complex subject.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research provides further detailed evidence that impartiality – along with accuracy – remains a bedrock of trust in the news media.

- We find that audiences really value what impartiality stands for, despite the complexity of the concept. Most people want to be exposed to a range of views, especially around politics and other serious and important topics. They recognise the risk of giving exposure to extreme views or one side in the name of balance. However, evidence from this group of engaged users is that they are even more concerned about the suppression and silencing of viewpoints.
- There are some differences across countries, especially in expectations of traditional sources between countries like the US on the one hand and the UK and Germany on the other. And younger people, who have grown up using more informal and digital sources, also tend to have different expectations, although their underlying attitudes and desires are remarkably similar to older people's.
- News – where balance and fairness within a story is particularly important – and analysis – which people also value but recognise carries greater risk – is distinguished from opinion, which people also want as part of the mix but which is partial by definition. Audiences have very different expectations of these layers of news.
- In the analogue world, differences between news, analysis and opinion were much clearer, with special labelling and clear sections, but in digital the divisions have blurred. For journalists, dilemmas around impartiality have also been tested by more informal formats such as social media, especially where news has become more emotive or controversial. Many fear that opinion and advocacy have become increasingly entwined with the news itself in a way that is often not transparent.

The mushrooming of perspectives and the range of new digital formats are putting new pressures on impartiality in news. So, how should media companies respond?

There is not one answer to this, given different traditions and regulatory environments. Some public service media companies like the BBC have concluded that they need to restate their commitment to impartiality – because of the link with trust – and are rethinking staff guidelines to take account of changing expectations⁶. Other news organisations are looking to align more closely with the views and values of their audiences and this may push them towards a more partial approach.

Even here, though, many will want to take note of audience desires for a range of views to be represented and to see clearer labelling of news and opinion. In particular:

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2020/tim-davie-intro-speech>

- There needs to be more recognition of the *new challenges to impartiality* highlighted in this report and how trust with specific audiences can be affected.
- There needs to be better training of journalists about the dangers of undermining impartiality in specific areas, for example, where journalism is more informal or accessed in distributed environments such as social media.
- News organisations should be more transparent over their policies around difficult issues like inclusion and exclusion, and false equivalence.
- There needs to be clearer and consistent labelling and signposting of different content types (news, analysis, opinion) to overcome consumer confusion in digital contexts.

These questions are not just for media companies. Given the importance of social media, search and other access points, technology platforms such as Facebook, Google and Apple, will also need to bear these points in mind. Their own trust will depend on better separating news and opinion and being transparent about difficult issues like inclusion and exclusion, whether by algorithm or human intervention.

News literacy is also playing a part in changing the ways in which impartiality can be achieved. Engaged and 'confident' consumers can increasingly create their own plurality through careful selection of multiple sources, but we find that others have more 'cautious' or 'concerned' mindsets that still rely on specific news brands to distinguish news from opinion and provide a range of views on important stories.

*“The news used to tell us what was happening and the public would determine how they felt. Now the news tells you what to feel and the public has to determine what is happening.”
(Twitter post)*



INTRODUCTION

Aim and objectives

This study set out to investigate how news consumers in different countries feel about impartiality and what they want, and to draw lessons for journalists and the news industry.

Specifically, the objectives were:

- To explore whether impartiality is still a relevant concept for different audiences in different countries.
- To understand whether audiences want journalists to be impartial, or whether they would prefer them to be more open about their biases and take a clear point of view.
- To explore whether people perceive a difference between newspapers and broadcasters these days, and between news and opinion.
- To examine how impartiality relates to trust, and what publishers should do as a result.

Methodology and sample

The research – a mix of diaries, discussion groups, and in-depth interviews – was conducted in Brazil, Germany, the UK, and the US among a sample of about a dozen engaged digital news consumers in each market, aged 20-60 (split into ages 20-34 and 35-60), including both men and women. They all regularly consumed news about politics and current affairs and, between them, used a mix of sources, formats and brands. They were recruited across the political spectrum and to reflect the ethnic/racial/migrant composition of each country, as well as representing a geographic spread.

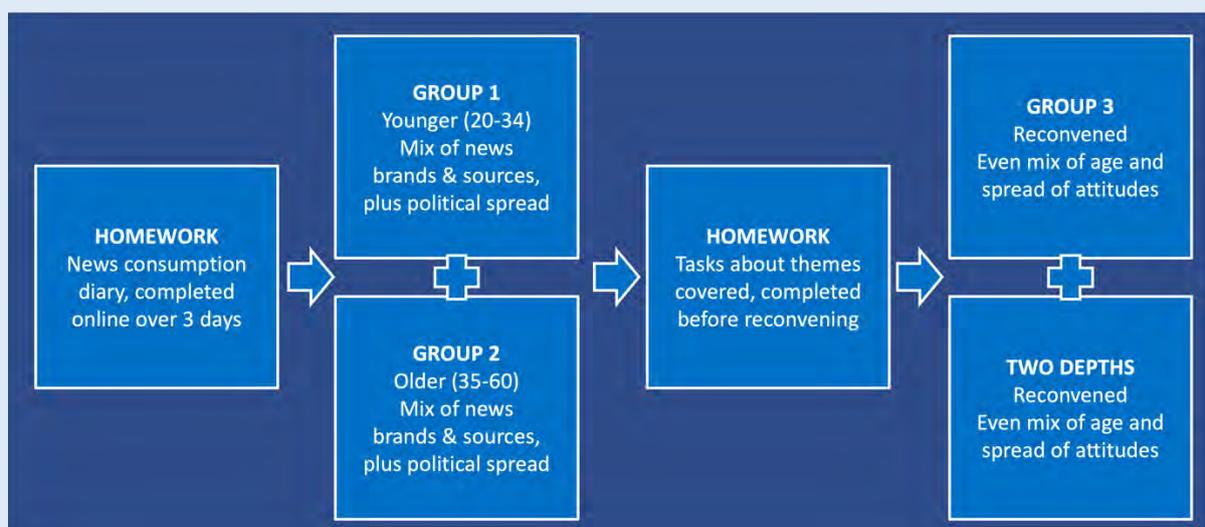


Figure 1: Summary of research design in each country

Using a staged, deliberative approach, the participants recorded a diary of their news behaviour in an app over three days before joining an online discussion via Zoom, followed the next day by tasks completed in the app.

The Zoom discussions were split into sessions of younger and older participants (groups 1 & 2), and used an extensive selection of news examples to explore understandings, perceptions, experiences and wishes of impartiality. The news stories were largely based on politics, coronavirus, climate change and social justice in order to balance variety with focus, so that discussions could delve into the ways in which news is constructed.

About half the participants reconvened in a further Zoom group (group 3, combining younger and older people), or one of two in-depth interviews, to reflect further on the issues.

A total of 20 sessions were conducted across the four countries, made up of 52 people who took part in one or more stages of the research (11 in the UK, 13 in the US, 14 in Germany, and 14 in Brazil). The fieldwork took place between 11 February and 5 March 2021. Further details of the methodology and sample composition are included in the appendix.

Countries researched

The research was conducted in four democratic countries – the UK, the US, Brazil (BR) and Germany (DE) – chosen for their different media contexts and political traditions, as well as their geographic spread, covering the Global South as well as the Global North.

The different contexts of impartiality, and different political traditions, condition audience understanding, behaviours and attitudes. The UK and Germany both have a public service tradition in their media, which emphasises impartiality and includes some independent market regulation, whereas the US and Brazil rely on rules set within organisations rather than across the market, thus prioritising free market choice. Although individual news organisations have their own standards on accuracy, fairness and representation of different views, the US's First Amendment, for instance, powerfully favours freedom of speech over the potential market constraints of impartiality rules.

The context of political polarisation is common to the UK, the US, and Brazil, where liberal elites are finding themselves challenged. In contrast, Germany's norms are coalitions and greater political consensus, which sets a different tone for public discourse and journalism.

News stimulus

Impartiality is a difficult topic to research. In order to help explore people's perceptions, experiences and wishes, several news stories were examined. Taken from a range of sources, and illustrative of different formats, the pieces revolved around a handful of subjects – the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, the recent US presidential election, Brexit, and various social justice stories – with similar local examples used in each country.

A note about the fieldwork period

The fieldwork took place over nearly a month from mid-February 2021, with project set-up beginning in January and analysis continuing through March. This period was bookended by dramatic news about Donald Trump in the US and Piers Morgan in the UK, which provided rich seams of discussion in some of the research sessions about the relationship between news and opinion.

- On 6 January 2021, Donald Trump impugned the US presidential election result and precipitated events at the US Capitol.
- In the UK, on 9 March 2021, Piers Morgan disputed claims made by Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex, in her recently broadcast Oprah interview⁷, which culminated in his walking out of ITV's *Good Morning Britain*.

⁷ Although this event happened just after the fieldwork period, there were several mentions in the UK discussions of Piers Morgan's critical views of the Duchess of Sussex in the preceding weeks. His comments attracted a record 58,000 complaints to the broadcast regulator Ofcom, though they later ruled that his behaviour did not breach impartiality guidelines.

A young man and woman are sitting on a tan sofa, watching a large television screen. The screen displays a news broadcast with a red header and various graphics. The room has a dark brick wall and a white flower-shaped light fixture hanging from the ceiling. A blue text box is overlaid on the screen.

*"Impartiality is that you report the facts without passing an opinion, the reporter's point of view."
(BR older)*

MAIN FINDINGS

This main section addresses engaged news consumers' perceptions of impartiality through the prism of sources and formats, journalistic practice and subject matter.

The report explains audiences' understanding of impartiality and how it relates to news and opinion, before exploring perceptions of the effect each source has on news. Next it examines various journalistic and editorial approaches that can compromise impartiality, where perceived motivations and intentions colour audiences' views, and it shows how this varies by subject matter.

The report identifies four different audience mindsets, which point to different requirements of impartiality, before suggesting how to build trust by balancing risks to impartiality. It concludes with some possible implications for the news industry.

1. What is impartiality?

What are audiences' understanding of impartiality? How do they perceive it in practice, beyond a Platonic ideal?

A complex concept

It is worth stating first that impartiality is not a straightforward idea. The BBC defines it as "reflecting all sides of arguments and not favouring any side"⁸ which, in practice, can be complex to deliver amidst the varied subject matter and many ways of providing news and engaging audiences.

The research participants associated impartiality with objectivity, being fair, being honest and truthful, reporting both sides, being transparent and open to everyone, and allowing a direct reflection of reality. Many of these terms were used interchangeably.

"The way I see impartiality is like being fair, that is how I would define impartiality. Even when a judge is listening to a case he is not swayed, he has just come there open-minded and then he is listening to both sides and then he makes a decision." (UK younger)

"Impartiality is that you report the facts without passing an opinion, the reporter's point of view." (BR older)

"If you get well versed people on both sides who can ... present good arguments, like good informed arguments, then yes, it is impartial." (US older)

Some people also understood impartiality to mean neutrality, in the sense of not taking sides. Neutrality is considered particularly relevant in news about politics. Others saw some nuance between impartiality and neutrality.

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/impartiality>

“When I hear the word neutral I think they don’t have a political stance ... They’re not left, they’re not right, they’re neutral ... But I think bias – I don’t know if that’s a different thing. I think that may be to do with what stories they prioritise to choose to show items of the news.” (UK younger)

“It’s about the facts! When I watch ARD there’s much less opinion, less personal colouration, less spin. I don’t feel like I’m being pushed in any one particular direction through one-sided reporting when I watch the Tagesschau – it’s neutral.” (DE older)

Impartiality can also be defined by what it is not. It was described as the opposite of bias, opinion, distortion, spin, sensationalism, being partial, applying a point of view, and being partisan. It applies not just to the news story but also to the selection and prioritisation of stories – in editorial as well as journalistic decisions.

“Opinion appears in lots of different news organisations. Some do it more blatantly than others ... You know, Fox and what is the other one, something America, those are really not news organisations they are just editorial talking mouths.” (US older)

It is interesting that the language surrounding impartiality can be loaded. ‘Bias’ tends to suggest something bad – a negative quality that should be avoided – whereas a ‘point of view’ does not carry this sentiment because opinions can be of great value to audiences.

A few people struggled with both the term and the concept. One or two actually muddled the word impartiality with bias (i.e. the opposite) – although, language aside, they felt sure they could recognise it in practice. Yet, overall, most people felt they understood broadly what impartiality is about.

The layers of news

In the discussions, audiences referred to different layers of news that they come across, from the dry facts at the core of a story to the context, analysis and opinion that can help them make sense of it. This audience perspective is visualised in the model below.

“The stuff that you get in the [dry facts] news is kind of an average – information that everyone can agree on and sign-off on. And the other you get to see where people meet in the middle and where they’re completely different. You get to hear all of the different opinions and not just the neutral middle.” (DE younger)

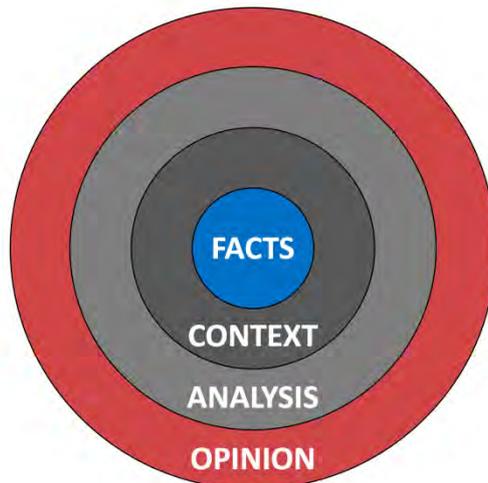


Figure 2: Audience model of news

- Facts:** The core layer of news is the realm of facts, which are unconcerned by any implications they might have for the audience. The facts are the who/what/where/when/how of an event; an untainted and indisputable reality. This core layer is considered by most audiences to represent the truth and requires journalists to report the facts accurately, objectively, and impartially so that there is no sense of the reporter's personal view. This reportage layer tends to be referred to as news and audiences largely want it clearly differentiated from opinion.

"The primary function of the news is to make us aware of what is going on in the world. I think a secondary function of the news is to then explore that and explore different viewpoints to help us on how to feel. I think, first, you know what is going on and then, second, you think about how that makes you feel once you have heard all the sides." (UK younger)

"What I need is a fair representation of the facts so that I can make up my own mind about a subject." (DE older)

"News should be separate from special interests - it's reporting versus entertainment for me personally." (US younger)

- Context:** News, in this essential sense, is perceived as transparent and pure. However, audiences recognise that background information can help contextualise news without distorting it. Background information sets out what is behind the news so that the audience can make sense of it. It can be delivered impartially with no sense of the reporter's personal view.

"You have to have a sense of a broad context to understand where things are coming from." (US older)

- Analysis:** Analysis extends the transparent facts and background context to explain what the information means, why it matters and what the implications might be. Generally, it is provided by respected correspondents with deep expertise in a subject. Yet some people conceptualise analysis as an overlap between news and opinion – a grey area between the colour of opinion and the sober black and white of facts – where impartiality

is at risk, especially when it comes to analysis of controversial political stories. While grounded in the facts, analysis can be misconstrued as opinion when it is at odds with the beliefs of the audience. For example, in Brazil, some Bolsonaro supporters are disdainful of critical coverage of the government, dismissing it as biased journalism. Sometimes bias is misconstrued in the tough questioning of politicians by journalists, where it is interpreted as taking sides (and impartiality is conflated with neutrality). Impartial broadcasters stick to the first three layers of facts, context and analysis, although they do also curate and signpost different opinions in a balanced way. Whereas some specialist publications provide just analysis and opinion.

“If I have to differentiate between analysis and opinion, I think that analysis would be more based on technical sources.” (BR younger)

- **Opinion:** Opinion provides an interpretation that can add value to the facts layer, especially in editorials and comment pieces, where the views of the reporter are transparent and clearly differentiated from the facts level of news. It can help audiences make sense of news by providing different perspectives, although it often selectively uses facts and context to make an argument advocating a particular view. It can be colourful, entertaining and easier to engage with, especially when it supports the views of the audience, although it can also challenge them.

“Biased news that tends in favour of what I think, is much easier for you to accept than unbiased news.” (BR older)

News shaped by familiar narratives helps audiences understand what is being reported, although they can also bend the story to fit existing prejudices. Some audiences interpret opinion as news when it shares their point of view. This comfort zone reinforces views while presenting a distorting lens on the world.

“It’s good for you to read something that you agree with or that covers what you think. That, in a way, massages the ego.” (BR younger)

On the other hand, opinionated news provides representation of different people and their interests by articulating their views. By extension, it also provides insights into other people.

“It is healthy to accept that there are other people out there that don’t have the same opinion as you. To grow up thinking that everybody thinks the same as you, you are not going to go very far in the world.” (UK older)

An impossible ideal

Although impartiality in news is considered important, some highly engaged news consumers warn that to hope for news reporting to be thoroughly impartial is impossibly idealistic. The responsibility, they argue, lies with the audience to consult different sources to overcome inevitable biases. However, this is not a realistic solution for most people.

“I don't believe in impartiality. There is no impartiality. All the media try to be impartial, but it's impossible to be impartial, everything has a point of view, everything is based on a point of view.” (BR younger)

In Summary: What is impartiality?

While recognising that opinion plays a role in making sense of what is happening in the world around them, it became clear in the course of the research that audiences hold the production of news to a high standard. On the whole, these engaged consumers want news to be clearly differentiated from opinion and, while they approve of reporting including analysis and context, they want it to be factual and adhere to the principle of impartiality.

This means the news industry should be careful to signpost the different layers of news, clearly differentiating news from opinionated content, particularly where the distinction easily blurs.



“The primary function of the news is to make us aware of what is going on in the world. I think a secondary function of the news is to ... explore different viewpoints to help us on how to feel. I think, first, you know what is going on and then, second, you think about how that makes you feel once you have heard all the sides.” (UK younger)

2. Impartiality and the affordances of media sources and formats

At face value, sources and formats might be thought of simply as neutral ways of providing news. However, the reality is that they fit into people's lives in different ways and carry assumptions that can impact how news is perceived. The affordances of sources vary. What do audiences anticipate and want from traditional sources and formats compared with newer media and the diversity of content and experiences available in the digital world?

This chapter covers:

- Television and radio
- Newspapers and their websites
- Social media
- News aggregators
- Podcasts and YouTube videos

Television and radio

To most audiences, impartiality in news matters slightly more on TV than it does in newspapers (and other sources) perhaps due to the immediacy of the moving image, as well as the human connection to tone, body language, emotion, and familiar presenters. In European countries such as the UK and Germany, expectations are also set by a long history of regulation of television news, which is designed to ensure fair and balanced coverage.

“The public broadcasters make the greatest efforts to keep things impartial. And there is a good deal more neutrality in the emotions – they don't play with emotion.” (DE younger)

“If it's coming from a source like the BBC and like ITV you're expecting a certain formality with it and you're expecting to see that impartiality there.” (UK older)

In the US, where broadcasters are not independently regulated for impartiality⁹, the comparison with newspapers is inverted. National TV news programmes are filled with opinion and audiences cannot imagine it any other way, whatever their view of it. Although familiar to all, some dislike the argumentative tone, which can be divisive and contributes to political polarisation.

“A lot of people don't tend to challenge their convictions too much ... They'll go for the most available accessible form, which is usually like syndicated TV programmes, which is why you get moderated misinformation.” (US younger)

Audiences' views vary by channel/programme brand. Formal scheduled news programmes often accompany routines (especially among older audiences) and, generally, people want them to maintain impartiality. Aside from the US, where the distinction between news and opinion can be blurred, the credibility of newsreaders in formal news programmes rests on

⁹ The US Federal Communications Commission's fairness doctrine for broadcasters was abandoned in 1987. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FCC_fairness_doctrine

maintaining impartiality. In Germany, some formal news programmes include an opinion segment, but they are clearly labelled.

Although broadcasters do carry opinion in debate formats, audiences in the UK and Germany generally appreciate the impartiality of the moderator, which contrasts with the US where hosts often take a partial position and argue a case. The airing of different opinions helps audiences understand the issues and form their own view. Informal, chatty styles can make news more engaging and accessible, but carry greater risk of presenter bias, although this is forgiven if unintentional and not systematic.

Radio offers the same ease as television. Bulletin summaries are generally felt to be impartial, although bias through omission is not obvious. Discussion, debate and phone-in formats are accepted as opinionated, in line with the values of the station brand.

Newspapers and their websites

Newspapers are grounded on either regulation or voluntary codes that outline a commitment to accuracy and fairness in news coverage, even if editorial and opinion sections take a particular point of view. Audiences tend to perceive newspapers as authoritative sources of news and recognise many have a political/philosophical leaning, which can at times appear to test impartiality.

“We’re all kind of aware of which political stance the different newspapers have. And I think that obviously it all depends on which you want.” (UK younger)

Although editorials and opinion pieces are separate and signposted, the distinction can become less clear in newspapers’ websites and in distributed digital environments, which can undermine perceptions of impartiality. Some younger Brazilians noticed with dismay the political stance of their newspapers during coronavirus lockdowns when they were pushed to consult other sources of news.

“I started to notice the difference between one newspaper and another. And we begin to realise: that newspaper is from the left, that is from the right. And I am not in favour of that, I think that newspapers have to be more impartial. I don’t think they should mix this up with information. I think that today my level of confidence in them is low.” (BR younger)

Nevertheless, some readers find comfort in their newspaper supporting their world view and do not have concerns about impartiality. In the US and Brazil, we found that newspapers were often perceived as less biased than television whereas in the UK and Germany it was the other way around. There is high anticipation of partiality in the UK (because many papers have long-recognised stances), but less so in Germany, and a mixed position in the US with its differentiation of editorial and opinion maintained by separate editors.

Many people perceive popular titles as sensationalist and often partial (especially in the UK), whereas quality titles are generally considered soberer, providing greater depth and stronger adherence to the principles of impartiality.

Although established newspaper brands have a status in the distributed environments of social media and aggregators, they are losing some relevance as print readership declines. Some younger audiences feel many newspapers represent an older generation and old social values that they do not share.

Social media

Audiences say social media offers the ease and convenience of being on-demand and providing the latest, most up-to-date news. Algorithms learn from the interests of the user, providing content from a variety of sources – although some say this poses the risk of creating filter bubbles that lack impartiality in content selection.

“For me, finding news on social media is just quicker accessibility. With Twitter I feel like their algorithm definitely picks up on what you like to view ... Some of the stuff I think could be opinion based, some of it’s not. A lot of it will be like Financial Times or New York Times or Wall Street Journal.” (US younger)

However, social media is also perceived as unreliable and carries quality risk in that the news might not be accurate, let alone impartial, and therefore requires caution. Although there is a lot of news from journalists and news organisations on social media, its feed structure can make everything look the same, making it hard to distinguish news from opinion, and reputable sources from the rest. People consider it inherently opinionated and it offers little quality control beyond the rules by which individual news brands operate. Yet, people make allowances for this marketplace nature.

“Social media ... is not exclusively a news format, so it’s a freedom of speech issue, they can say whatever you want.” (US older)

“They have a bit more free rein on social media because it’s your choice to follow. It’s your choice to engage and it’s your choice to consume. And so they can be more, they have a bit more of a personality on that platform.” (UK younger)

Furthermore, in selecting a wide range of views, users believe they can create an impartiality of sorts. Social media provides a range of opinions and comments, and direct, unmediated access to opinion leaders, including politicians, journalists and commentators. These views and reactions help audiences make sense of news and help shape users’ views, which can shift the balance of impartiality as further views come into consideration.

“Twitter is my sort of example of seeing the story but then, also starting to read all the comments just so you can see what other people were actually thinking. So, you are sort of verifying ... Your scales of impartiality start to shift on there, based on what everybody else was saying.” (UK older)

Social media can make people feel part of events, especially younger audiences. It can blur the boundaries between reporting, witnessing and participating in events as they unfold. Some younger Americans spoke about feeling part of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in this way, with direct connection providing a sense of bypassing potentially partial news coverage.

Social media provides audiences with emotional reward when they relate to comments and reactions. However, participants said it also carries the risk of getting caught in provocative echo chambers that reinforce partial views; views that are amplified in the spotlight of social media and go unconstrained by the conventions of traditional media. Some charismatic personalities exploit this attention at the expense of accuracy and impartiality.

News aggregators

News aggregators are also a popular means of accessing news from a range of sources. People get news from aggregators like Apple News¹⁰, Facebook News and Google News Showcase¹¹, all of which make decisions about what to show, whether by algorithm or a human editor.

As with social media, news is provided from a range of sources. However, there seems to be less concern about the news selection, perhaps because, unlike social media, aggregators are designed as platforms for news and are not cluttered with other content. Yet, there are still decisions being made about the content to surface, which has impartiality implications (range of views represented, limited exposure, balance and omission), even if some users seem unaware or unconcerned. It was only in the reconvened discussions, after examining their own habits, that some participants noticed these implications.

“You wake up, you scroll through the news aggregator, you click on stories that look like fun. You don’t really think about where they are all coming from or the sources.” (US older)

“I started realising that it was actually hard for me in my normal ways of news consumption to really get an unbiased view because on my news aggregators and Facebook will suggest things to you based on what you have already been reading. So, you can just be in kind of an echo chamber and it made me realise I need to actually go a bit outside of that and hunt down other opinions.” (US older)

Online aggregators provide the advantage of a plurality of views, which may offset the risk of bias from a single source, but participants also worried that the algorithms can limit exposure to more of the same, creating a filter bubble, which risks impartiality.

Podcasts and YouTube videos

While in some countries TV and radio are regulated for impartiality, new digital video and audio formats are growing in popularity but remain largely unregulated. As with social media, these environments mix reliable sources, many of which are regulated for accuracy and impartiality, with others that are not.

Podcasts and YouTube videos were enthusiastically discussed by some people (especially a few of the younger participants) who spoke of the freedom to do things differently, unburdened by traditional constraints and expectations. Audiences find they can be more conversational and intimate than other forms of broadcast. Some shows flourish with highly

¹⁰ Apple News is preloaded in the iPhone.

¹¹ Google News Showcase launched in late 2020 (February 2021 in the UK).

opinionated presenters, free from the constraints of impartiality (as in the example of the late Rush Limbaugh¹² in the US).

“I tune in to him [Rush Limbaugh], I watch his podcasts online, I stream him ... I listen to him in the car. So that is just my favourite ... I don’t believe every single person is telling me the truth, but I feel that is my responsibility to kind of go and pick and choose the outlets that I receive news from and to decipher them myself.” (US older)

Many of these newer digital audio and video formats, such as the Joe Rogan Experience on Spotify, have built a large following outside the US. In crossing borders, they are arguably eroding the experience and anticipation of impartiality outside the US.

The diversity of available views enables some heavy and dedicated consumers to create their own form of impartiality, in the same way as consulting different views on social media.

“I feel like a podcast is a place where people share their opinions and so I feel like it is not really impartial ... Each individual viewpoint would be probably slightly biased, but because you are hearing all of the viewpoints together that could make it non-biased.” (UK older)

As with social media, traditional content is also available. Established media providers use the digital audio and video platforms as additional ways to distribute their traditional formats, which adhere to their established impartiality rules.

“What I would consider most impartial would be the podcast, which only reports the news. Or at least, the ones I usually listen to, they go through the news of the day, just reporting, without comment.” (BR younger)

These new digital formats are still evolving and audiences’ experiences and expectations of them are not set in stone.

In Summary: The affordances of media sources and formats

The affordances of sources and formats are summarised in the table below.

¹² Rush Limbaugh was a popular American radio personality and conservative political commentator who died while the fieldwork was in progress.

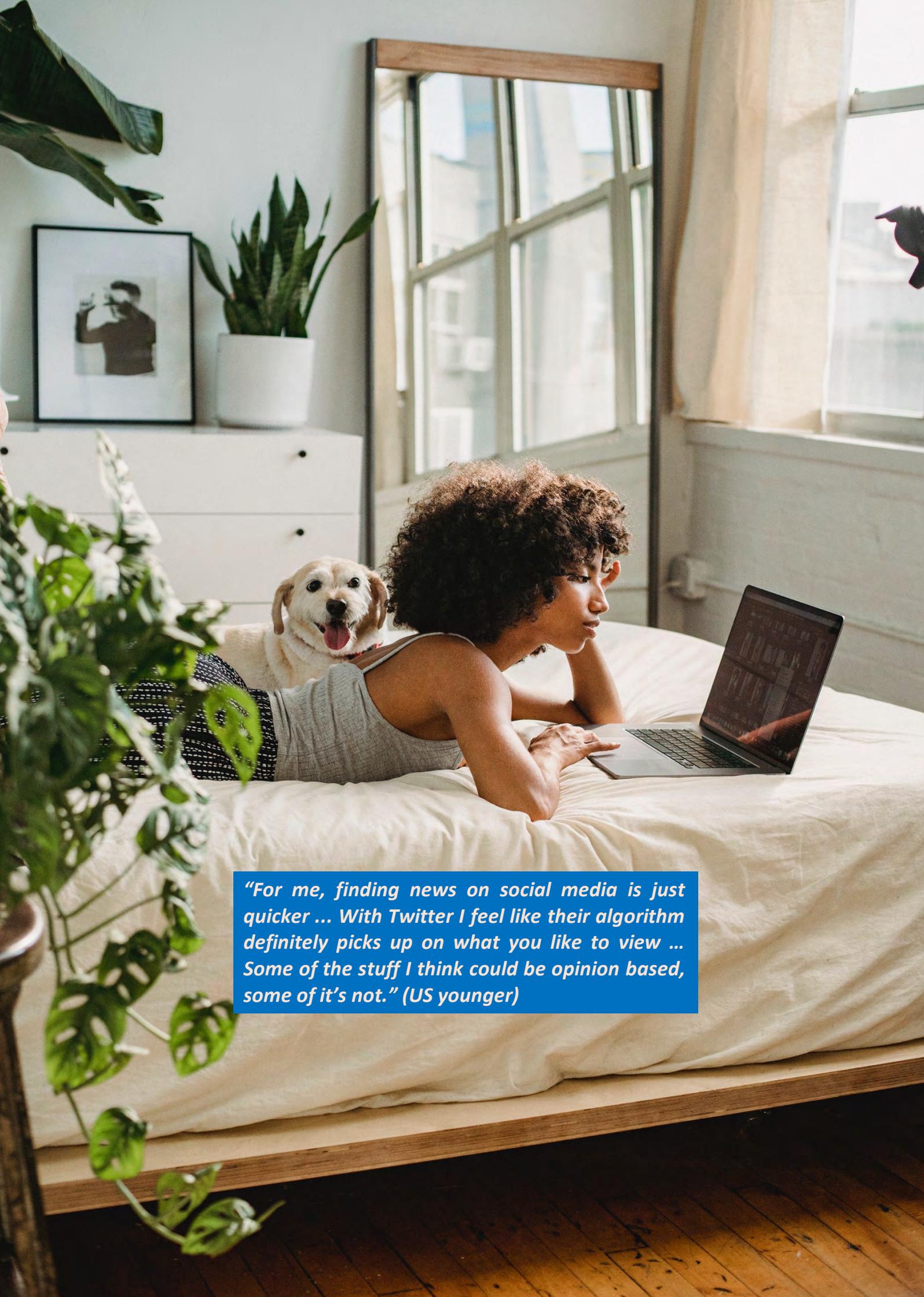
	EXPERIENCE & REQUIREMENTS OF IMPARTIALITY	DIFFERENCES BY AUDIENCE & COUNTRY
TV & radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power of audio/visuals makes impartiality matter more than in print • Opinions accepted if signposted • Formal formats tend to be held to stricter standards with impartiality than chatty styles and debate formats • Lapses in informal formats may be forgiven if regarded as human error 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US: highly opinionated network TV news is polarising, but change unthinkable – belief in free market and free speech, underpinned by First Amendment • UK & DE: public service tradition of impartiality expected
Newspapers & their websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written word has some latitude with impartiality in headlines – can be a comfort zone for audience aligned views • Opinions welcome in editorials • Less anticipation of impartiality in populist titles than quality end of the market • Sensationalism suggests bias, which can corrode trust outside the core readership • Established brands provide credibility in social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More relevant as a source to older people • US: newspapers considered generally less biased than network TV news
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly associated with opinion • Provides direct access to thought leaders' views, as well as other users' reactions and opinions, which help make sense of news and shape views • Can be an echo chamber, reinforcing opinions, and poses risk of harsh reaction beyond that bubble • Usurping traditional role of newspapers, but without anticipation of impartiality, and quality risk too • Can allow user to be virtual participant in events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More popular with younger people, and avoided by some older and less digitally savvy audiences • BR: greater use in pandemic revealed deficiencies of traditional news media • DE: less popular as a news source
News aggregators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plurality of sources gives range of views to help audiences create impartiality through consumption • Antidote to bias of individual sources • But bias can arise from algorithms creating filter bubbles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular with younger people, especially in the US
Podcasts & YouTube videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can feel more intimate as if being personally addressed • Formats vary, but generally afforded greater freedom to be opinionated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less constrained by national boundaries

Traditional news sources – television, radio and newspapers (in both print and website forms) – carry greater expectations around impartiality than newer, digital sources and formats.

In broadcast, impartiality matters more in formal news programmes; the bar is lower in debate and commentary formats. Impartiality is also considered a little less important in print, where there is great tolerance of the written word providing opinions in headlines and comment pieces (although the experience and expectation of impartiality in print and broadcast is reversed in the US).

Social media carries the least anticipation of impartiality and there is little wish to impose any restrictions. Along with online aggregators, podcasts and videos, the newer digital sources are considered to provide access to a range of views, which is part of their appeal. Any anticipation of impartiality is derived from the origin of the content accessed, but it is framed by the platform, especially in social media where news is not its exclusive purpose. Nevertheless, the role of algorithms means that users feel they are at risk of limited news exposure and uncertain impartiality standards.

Given the changes in news consumption behaviour and the growth of new digital platforms as sources of news, impartiality is no longer an issue just for traditional media companies. It is now also an issue for the technology platforms and aggregators, and those responsible for their regulation.



"For me, finding news on social media is just quicker ... With Twitter I feel like their algorithm definitely picks up on what you like to view ... Some of the stuff I think could be opinion based, some of it's not." (US younger)

3. Impartiality and journalism in practice

How does the perception and desire for impartiality vary by the ways in which news is crafted: by the choice of words written, the tone in a reporter's voice, and the decisions about what is and isn't included?

To understand audience perceptions, we prompted people with a range of current news stories that illustrate different ways in which journalists and presenters deal with news. The stories ranged from coronavirus and climate change, where facts and science are to the fore, to political coverage of the US 2020 presidential election and Brexit, where opinions are rife.

Using examples of opinionated TV, such as Tucker Carlson on Fox News, Anderson Cooper on CNN, and Piers Morgan on ITV's *Good Morning Britain*, as well as opinionated Tweets and newspaper headlines, different types of content stimulated discussion of the different layers of news and what audiences notice and want in terms of impartiality.

This chapter examines audience perceptions of how impartiality (or lack thereof) manifests in news in the following ways:

- Language and headlines
- Formality and informality
- Display of emotions
- Opinion and comment
- Explainers and fact-checkers

Language and headlines

Words are important. They can be interpreted in different ways and, in a short headline, can be used to judge the overall meaning of a news story.

Using topical political and science stories (such as the events at the US Capitol in January 2021 and climate change), various news headlines and words were presented to explore whether and how they contribute to perceptions of impartiality or bias in news.

<p>Language – Climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climate crisis Climate emergency Global heating Global meltdown Global warming 	<p>Newspaper headlines – Brexit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our time has come A new dawn for Britain UK's leap into the unknown Britain bows out of the EU with a mix of regret and optimism Brexit: UK leaves the European Union 	<p>Sprache – Klima</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Klimakrise Klimanotstand/-notfall Klimakatastrophe Klimawandel Erderwärmung Klimazerstörung Klimahysterie Klimawahn
<p>Language – US Capitol</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic terrorists Extremists Insurrectionists Mob Patriots Protestors Rioters Trump's footsoldiers 	<p>Linguagem – Amazônia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aquecimento Global Emergência climática Queimadas Desmatamento Globalismo/Ecologismo 	<p>Sprache – "Sturm auf den Reichstag"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inländische Terroristen (Rechts-)Extremisten Aufständische Mob Patrioten Demonstranten Gegner der Demokratie Querdenker

Figure 3: Examples of language and headlines

Audiences said headlines can signal the sentiment – and therefore the level of bias – in a report. Words they interpreted as alarmist, rather than simply descriptive, might be taking a side. Language is a powerful building block of news that can signal bias. People extrapolate from single words and phrases to form a view of the entire coverage.

Most people said they prefer neutral language, but more emotive terms do appeal when a particular perspective resonates with the views of the audience. Zealous adherence to impartiality can make for dull reading.

Some subjects have an established vocabulary and there needs to be a sound reason to deviate. For example, 'climate change' is a familiar idea, whereas 'climate emergency' feels alarmist to some people – is the phrase being used to catch attention rather than reflect the science?

“Not all of these terms are the same. Some of the words used have more implicit bias or opinion than others. I would say ‘global warming’ is relatively unbiased, but to say a ‘global meltdown’ – sort of telling you that the world is collapsing right now – and there is definite bias in that one. I don’t think that a scientist would use the term ‘meltdown’.” (US older)

However, there is greater language use tolerance when reporting in the heat of the moment. In extreme unfolding events, such as occurred at the US Capitol in Washington DC on 6 January 2021, and the attempted storming of the Reichstag in Berlin on 29 August 2020, neutrality might not be possible and some people consider it inappropriate.

“Calling those guys ‘demonstrators’ is the most neutral term, sure, but it is also a trivialisation. In this case a trivialisation can cause just as much damage as overdoing things.” (DE younger)

It was striking how different news outlets used such different language to refer to the people who broke into the US Capitol – ‘domestic terrorists’, ‘extremists’, ‘insurrectionists’, ‘rioters’, ‘protestors’, ‘Trump’s footsoldiers’ and ‘patriots’ – reflecting the political polarisation of US news media and audiences. When the words were presented in the US research discussions, responses fell along the same political lines.

“Yeah, out of all of those, the neutral word that stands out to me is just protestors. You know, I don’t want to categorise someone as a rioter or a mob, unless I know. That is completely opinionated.” (US older)

“If anywhere in the article the journalist himself, herself, is referring to the group as patriots, that tells me that it’s biased and that the journalist is offering implicit approval of what they have done. Everything else is pretty much a descriptive, but to say that they are patriots is to say that they were doing the right thing and that is very much an opinion.” (US older)

In the UK, examples of Brexit headlines were recognised as largely divided along Leave and Remain lines. Some people believed optimistic and uplifting newspaper headlines were appropriate to mark an end to the divisive debate, rendering impartiality irrelevant.

“They’ve got a responsibility to try and cheer us up a little bit ... It has happened, you have got to live with it and start putting a positive spin on it. So, something like the New Dawn for Britain is sort of just a positive spin on those people who are sort of sitting with doom and gloom and saying, ‘oh I wish we didn’t leave’. So, I think this one has actually got a little bit of naughtiness, I suppose, behind it to try and influence how we are thinking.” (UK older)

Tolerance evaporates when it comes to hurtful language directed at individuals, particularly in the minds of younger people, although this stems from a belief in kindness more than impartiality. In the example of columnist Suzanne Moore – who left the *Guardian* after describing sex as a biological classification and “not a feeling” in her column about protecting women’s sex-based rights¹³ – some people considered her comments to be transphobic and therefore unacceptable.

“She’s allowed an opinion but ... she should also be aware that because of her position of power she needs to be aware of every, you know – the fact that life has changed and things are different from what they were years ago. I mean it’s hurtful to people.” (UK younger)

Formality and informality

News programmes were once mostly formal in nature, whereas now there are many styles, from the traditional newsreader sitting behind a desk to the informality of sofas, podcasts and social media.

Images of different television formats and presenting styles were shown to participants in order to explore how formality and informality are perceived to relate to impartiality and

¹³ Many staff complained to the editor that this was a transphobic view. Suzanne Moore also wrote of “being deemed transphobic by an invisible committee on social media” in “Women must have the right to organise. We will not be silenced”.

what audiences want. Local images were shown in each country representing formal news bulletins, informal conversational news magazine shows and podcast discussions.



Figure 4: Examples of formal and informal news broadcast formats

The anticipation of impartiality in broadcast news varies by format. Audiences explained that formal news programmes and bulletins exude authority. They are generally required and considered to be impartial (except in the US where partisan national shows are the norm, to some people’s dismay). They are more relevant to older audiences whose routines are built around scheduled programmes.

“I’m expecting it [formal style] to be impartial ... Just because they’re formal I expect them to just present me their data and like it says, breaking news, and just kind of cover the story, not delve into how they feel or how the network feels about anything.” (US younger)

Informal, chatty formats, often conducted from a sofa, are considered less likely to be impartial because, without a script, personal views have more chance of slipping out, but there is also greater tolerance of innocent breaches of impartiality.

“If someone’s just reading the news and reading the bullet points on the daily card then you can say ‘well that is the news’. Whereas as soon as someone starts chatting or having a conversation they are bringing – it might be unconscious – but they’re putting across bias, depending on what sort of news channel you’re listening to.” (UK younger)

“You could have a chat, but a chat tends to lead to people commenting on the news. Like, if you say ‘the headline was this, what are you guys thinking about that?’ that is going to lead right into opinion, versus someone just reporting facts off a teleprompter.” (US older)

In the UK and Germany, talk shows and debates on TV and radio are expected to represent a range of views, which is consistent with maintaining impartiality. Having a panel consisting of

different voices can help audiences understand the issue, but audiences want and expect moderators to remain neutral.

“If I don’t know anything about it, then something like the Tagesschau is more important, where I get the facts in an objective report. If I already know a bit about the subject then I’m fine with a talk show in which individuals voice their opinions.” (DE younger)

Generally, audiences feel personal views are more acceptable when clearly differentiated from the factual layer of news, although this carries the risk of undermining the credibility of the journalist or news brand. However, there are exceptions for big personalities or where the programme is recognised for being opinionated. Examples are the UK’s Piers Morgan¹⁴ (erstwhile presenter on ITV’s *Good Morning Britain*) and partisan US broadcast formats.

“I’m not even a massive fan of Piers Morgan but I’m like drawn to him like a moth to a flame, I can’t stop listening to him.” (UK younger)

Display of emotions

Emotions from on-the-scene reporters and commentators in the studio were once resisted in broadcast news but are now increasingly part of it.

Film clips and still images displaying emotions were used to explore what audiences want. The examples included American news and political commentator Van Jones tearfully commenting on the election of Joe Biden: “It’s easier to be a parent this morning. It’s easier to tell your kids character matters.”¹⁵



Figure 5: Examples of the display of emotions

¹⁴ Piers Morgan walked out of the show on 9 March 2021, which was after the fieldwork period.

¹⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eMoCW1Pq54>

Emotions in formal broadcast news formats are still generally frowned upon, but tend to be more accepted in more casual formats. The risk, though, is that the emotion reveals partisan views.

“It depends on their intentions. If it’s only about reporting and handing on information, I don’t think it’s okay. Journalists can’t go into emotions there because it can quickly manipulate.” (DE older)

However, emotion is welcomed by some people (especially younger people and those on the left). Audiences tend to be forgiving of a reporter being overwhelmed in the moment (e.g. a tearful reaction to reporting COVID-19 news), although some suggest it might be the wrong journalist covering the story in such situations. This emotional display can help the audience connect with the story by arousing empathy and it can make news more compelling.

“In my point of view it matters, because it shows that you are a human being like us, not a machine. Do not report 250,000 dead as if they were 250,000 reals or objects! You have lives, families, lost stories. I think that bringing the human fact is very important.” (BR older)

“Yeah, it kind of breaches what impartiality is all about. But for me, if a journalist is very visibly upset by something or emotional I don’t really think of it as much as maybe as something else, because I just think well they’re only human.” (UK younger)

Such displays of emotion risk impartiality because there is, at the very least, a tacit personal comment on the story. It may be accepted when the sentiment is shared by the audience, but it is a problem when the audience feels differently about the subject. The heartfelt reaction by CNN’s Van Jones to Biden’s election victory expressed the enormous relief felt by some audiences, as illustrated in the quote below, but it left others cold.

“I don’t think a showing of emotion is bias per se, but I guess the things he [Van Jones] was saying to me are factual. And in the video, of course, he wants to live in a society where people are not, like, persecuted for being Muslim or because they’re black etc ... I’m just like ‘Oh my God I agree, like, I feel what he’s feeling. I understand his tears.’” (US younger)

Uncontrolled emotion in the journalist is more surprising and much less tolerated in the UK and Germany, where there is a stronger anticipation of stoicism, than in the US and Brazil. An example of ZDF presenter Claus Kleber fighting back tears when reporting on refugees being welcomed¹⁶ is a rare example in Germany.

There can also be a suspicion that emotional display in monologues on TV and social media is sometimes a performance. This can feel manipulative and fake, and matters particularly when it comes to reporting on politics.

Opinion and comment

There is a long tradition of opinion being provided in newspaper editorials and comment pieces. Opinion can also be found on television and in newer digital sources and formats. The

¹⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1zvfLk065I>

rise of social media has fuelled growth in opinion but muddled the distinction with impartial news.

A range of examples across newspapers, television and social media, representing perspectives from the left and right, was used to stimulate the discussions.

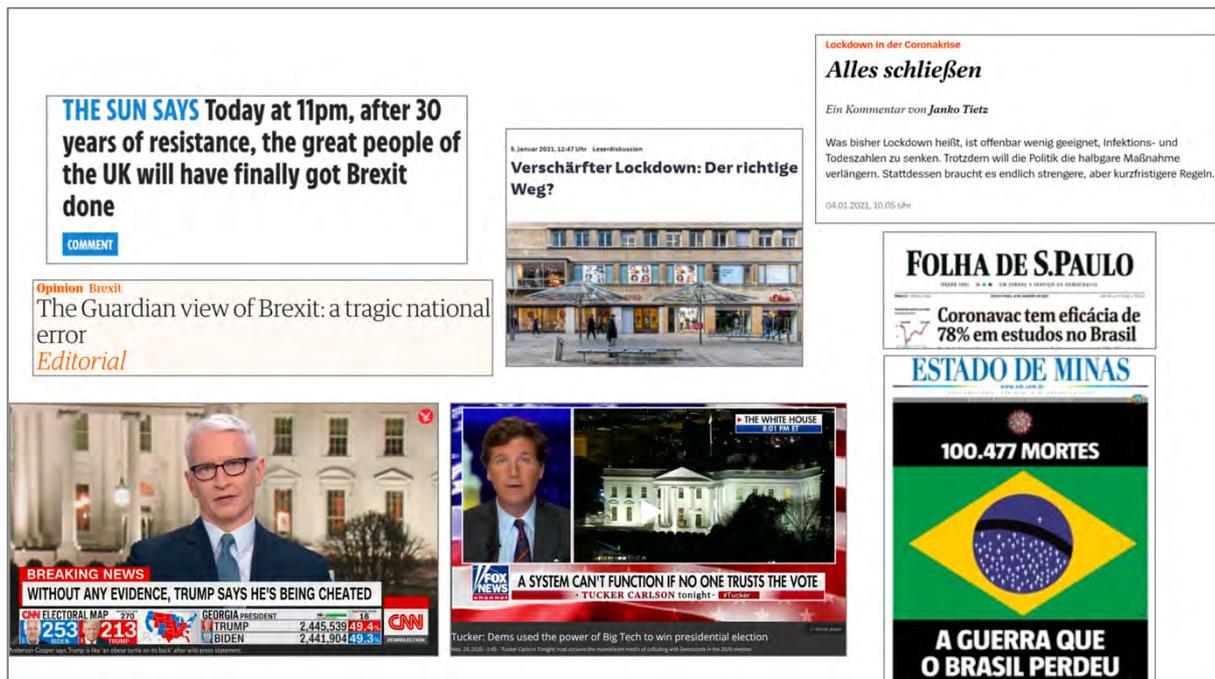


Figure 6: Examples of opinion and comment

Audiences value opinion as a supplement to facts but generally want the facts to be established first. They worry about blurring of the two.

“It’s a nice additional piece. If I’m interested in a subject, I do read the commentaries on it, but it’s always towards the end after I’ve read the actual news.” (DE older)

On the whole, participants say newspapers, television and radio can differentiate between facts and opinion pieces by using different formats, sections and signposting. The distinction can be less obvious in the US, though, where the media is more politically partisan and opinion can be mixed in with news without any signposting, to the frustration of some audiences. The problem¹⁷ is neatly summed up in this meme, spotted by a US participant on Twitter:

The news used to tell us what was happening and the public would determine how they felt. Now the news tells you what to feel and the public has to determine what is happening.

Newspaper editorials on many topics, from the pandemic to Brexit, either reinforce readers’ views or give them insight into the views of others. It was notable in the US that reactions to CNN anchor Anderson Cooper referring to Donald Trump as “an obese turtle on his back flailing in the hot sun”¹⁸ because of his refusal to accept the results of the presidential

¹⁷ Some commentators argue that the abandonment of the fairness doctrine in the 1980s in the US has allowed opinion to overshadow news. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FCC_fairness_doctrine

¹⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiU5oa3tsu0>

election, and to Tucker Carlson on Fox News questioning the legitimacy of the vote, tended to pan out along corresponding political lines.

"I think what you are asking about is unfortunately the casualty of journalism, in that editorialism and journalism, it has been mixed more and more and more. And we want to eliminate that, let's get rid of that." (US older)

In social media, distinguishing between news and opinion is not easy because of the lack of cues, which some people consider a problem. Some worry that opinionated content is contaminating news. Others, though, simply assume opinion is the default in social media.

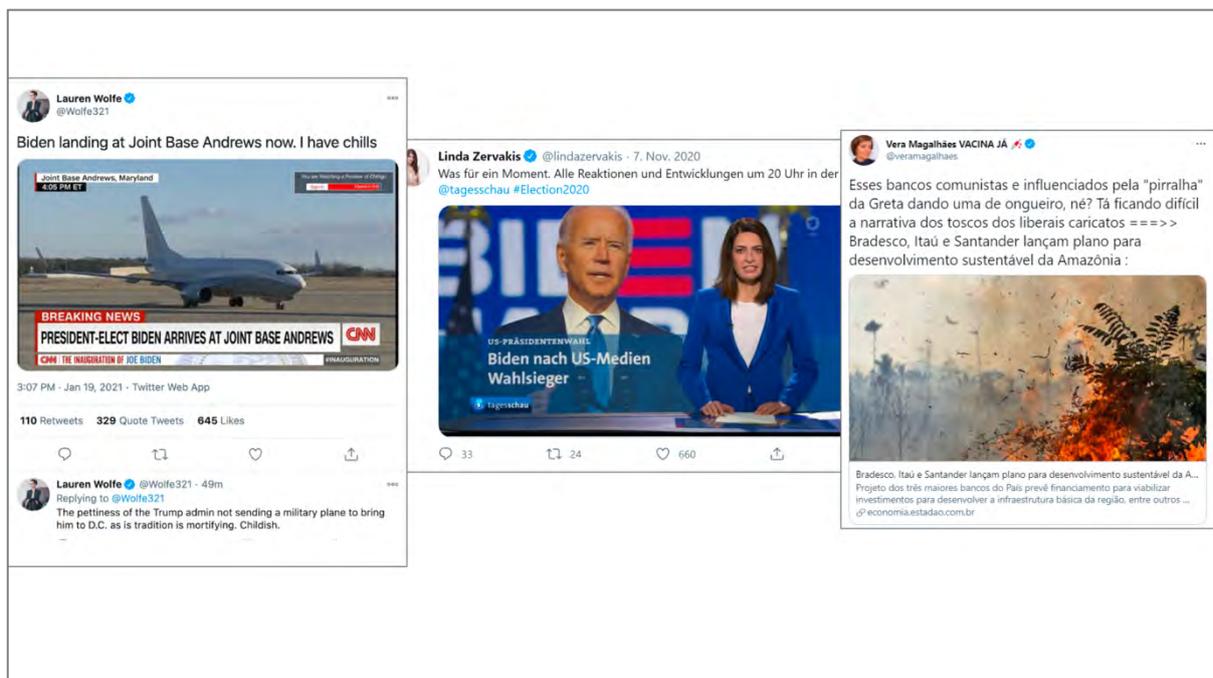


Figure 7: Examples of journalists making personal comments

While most audiences do not believe technology platforms should be regulating news for impartiality, they do caution that journalists should be careful not to undermine news outlets' impartial credentials when using social media (especially in the UK and Germany).

"Journalists need to be mindful of using other platforms and their roles as journalists because I think personalities can overshadow the role that they have as journalists. But, also, it deflects from the news that they are trying to share because of their personal views." (UK older)

"It's really difficult. You don't want to forbid people their right to free speech, but at the same time they [journalists] need to be aware of their larger role and the influence they have." (DE older)

However, when clearly signalled, opinion is widely valued. Opinion matures a topic by broadening and deepening it, and contextualising it. It helps audiences make sense of the news and understand the issues, making it more relatable and helping audiences form their own views. The opinions and comments shared in social media can help provide insight into other people.

“Sometimes it’s good for you to hear a comment from a professional, a person who knows the subject, because it can even help you form opinions.” (BR older)

Opinion also has the capacity to keep news interesting, especially when laced with humour.

“It’s not so serious and heavy all the time ... I really do enjoy getting it in a format that you can laugh about some things, because some things are honestly funny. Like, ‘is this really happening?’ So, I really appreciate that balance.” (US younger)

“I think satire brings a reflection, a smarter analysis of the news.” (BR older)

Satire tends to attract audiences who sympathise with the views expressed. Impartiality is not a concern in the way it is for other layers of news.

Explainers and fact-checks

Some news brands provide explainers of complex topics and fact-checks of assertions made by others. They raise a question about impartiality because they may be seen as adopting a point of view – particularly when it comes to fact-checks, which make determinations of truth and falsity.

Examples relating to COVID-19 and the environment were used to explore what people want in terms of impartiality.

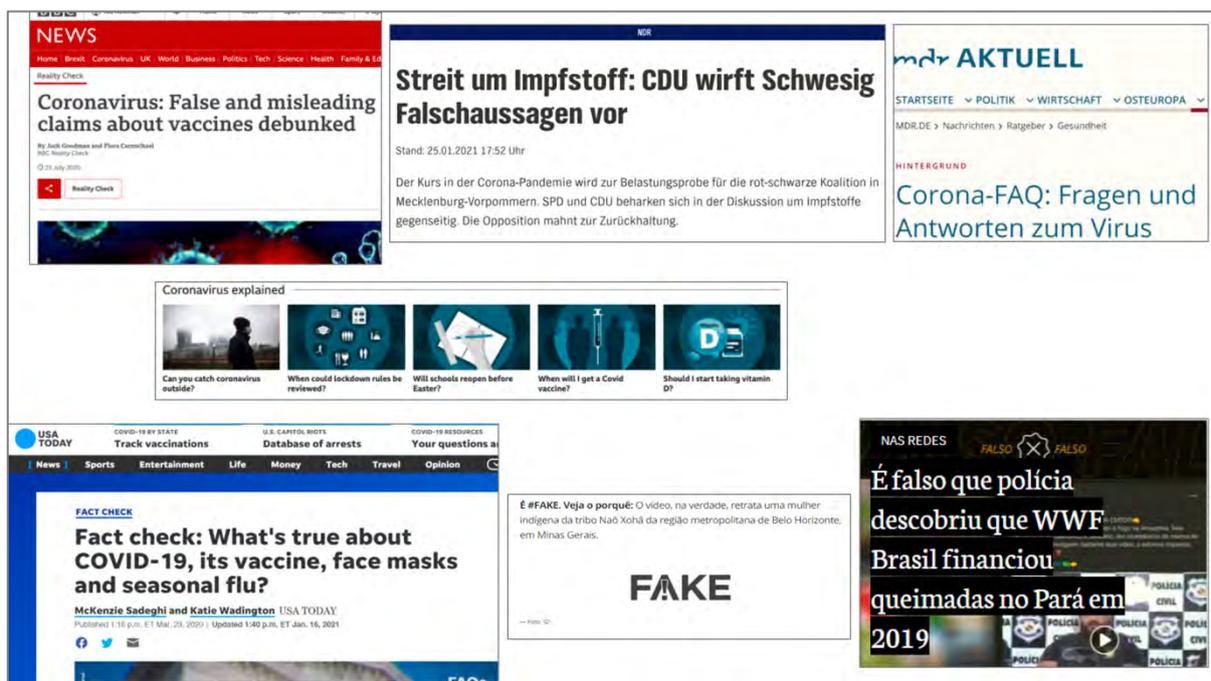


Figure 8: Examples of fact-checks and explainers

Explainers and fact-checks are perceived by audiences as supplements to news and therefore different from news. They fit in the context layer of the news model¹⁹. The very term ‘fact-

¹⁹ See model of news in The layers of news section in Chapter 1.

checker' suggests the territory of facts and an implicit counter to opinions and misinformation. Rather than representing a risk of bias, they are largely perceived as a bastion of impartiality. In the forms of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and Questions & Answers (Q&A) the information is generally perceived as transparent and accessible, which is appreciated.

"I find it useful because facts are facts and it's not really biased if you're telling someone the truth." (US younger)

"I don't agree with the existence of impartiality, but I think that this is a way to reach impartiality. If there's anything I can quote that I think leads to impartiality, it's fact-checking." (BR younger)

These approaches to information helpfully differentiate facts from opinion, and provide context to help understand issues. Examples relating to coronavirus were applauded, particularly in Brazil where concerns were raised about fake news and misinformation.

"In my view, it is impartial. You are giving the real news. He went, checked the source and checked the truthful data." (BR older)

The information about coronavirus was perceived as factual and neutral and was widely appreciated. The pandemic made the desire for plain facts more acute.

"Early on in the pandemic I found some Q&A stuff. So, all the stuff at the bottom of the BBC website. So, every time there was a news edit via the ... places in your area – you know, the kind of individual bite size, these are the symptoms – I actually found that very useful and comforting." (UK younger)

It was notable that people preferred to rely on trusted brands for this information. In the US this closely aligned with their news brand preferences along political lines.

One or two people in Germany pushed back at the idea of absolute truth, which underpins the notion of being able to check facts. Yet, most people felt very comfortable with the sense of transparency that fact-checkers provide, and the accessibility of question and answer formats.

The perceived emphasis on impartiality enhanced brand perceptions during the pandemic, when there was great interest in learning the facts about coronavirus.

In Summary: Journalism in practice

Impartiality requirements of journalism in practice are summarised in the table below.

	EXPERIENCE & REQUIREMENTS OF IMPARTIALITY	DIFFERENCES BY AUDIENCE & COUNTRY
Language & headlines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headlines used to assess the sentiment of an article • Easily display bias, especially when diverging from established phrases • Greater tolerance when reporting in the heat of the moment • Younger audiences dislike hurtful language directed at individuals, and issues about which they care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BR: some younger audiences became aware of bias in traditional media when the pandemic prompted wider use of sources online
Formality & informality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chatty style can be engaging, but also presents greater risk of bias in comments and reactions, which may be forgiven • Formal formats should maintain impartiality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US: exception is opinionated network news shows • Debate formats tend to be neutrally moderated, which audiences like, but in the US often have a host supporting an argument
Display of emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can provide strong connection with audience • Some issues (e.g. COVID-19) sometimes require some emotion, expressing the sentiment of the audience • Uncontrolled emotional reactions in reporter/presenter forgiven if audience sympathises with issue, but can seem unprofessional • Nevertheless, generally less accepted because of the risk of manipulation, especially when the topic is political in nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US: pulling on emotions may be rejected by politically polarised audiences, especially if it seems contrived and manipulative • UK, DE: unfamiliar and not wanted; actively disliked in DE
Opinion & comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can enhance understanding of news and other positions • Accepted when clearly signposted in traditional media • More hazardous in social media where news and opinion easily blur; unwise for journalists who also represent news brands to make comments • Humour and satire have a place as an extension of opinion and comment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Younger audiences more comfortable with newer sources and differentiating opinion from impartial news • They also believe some news should take a stance
Explainers & fact-checkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally well received • Perceived as the opposite of opinion and a useful antidote • FAQ/Q&A seem transparent and therefore agenda free • Particularly helpful during the coronavirus pandemic; sense of emphasis on impartiality enhanced brand perceptions 	

Engaged audiences generally feel confident to navigate the news landscape through the many ways in which journalism upholds, or falls foul of, impartiality.

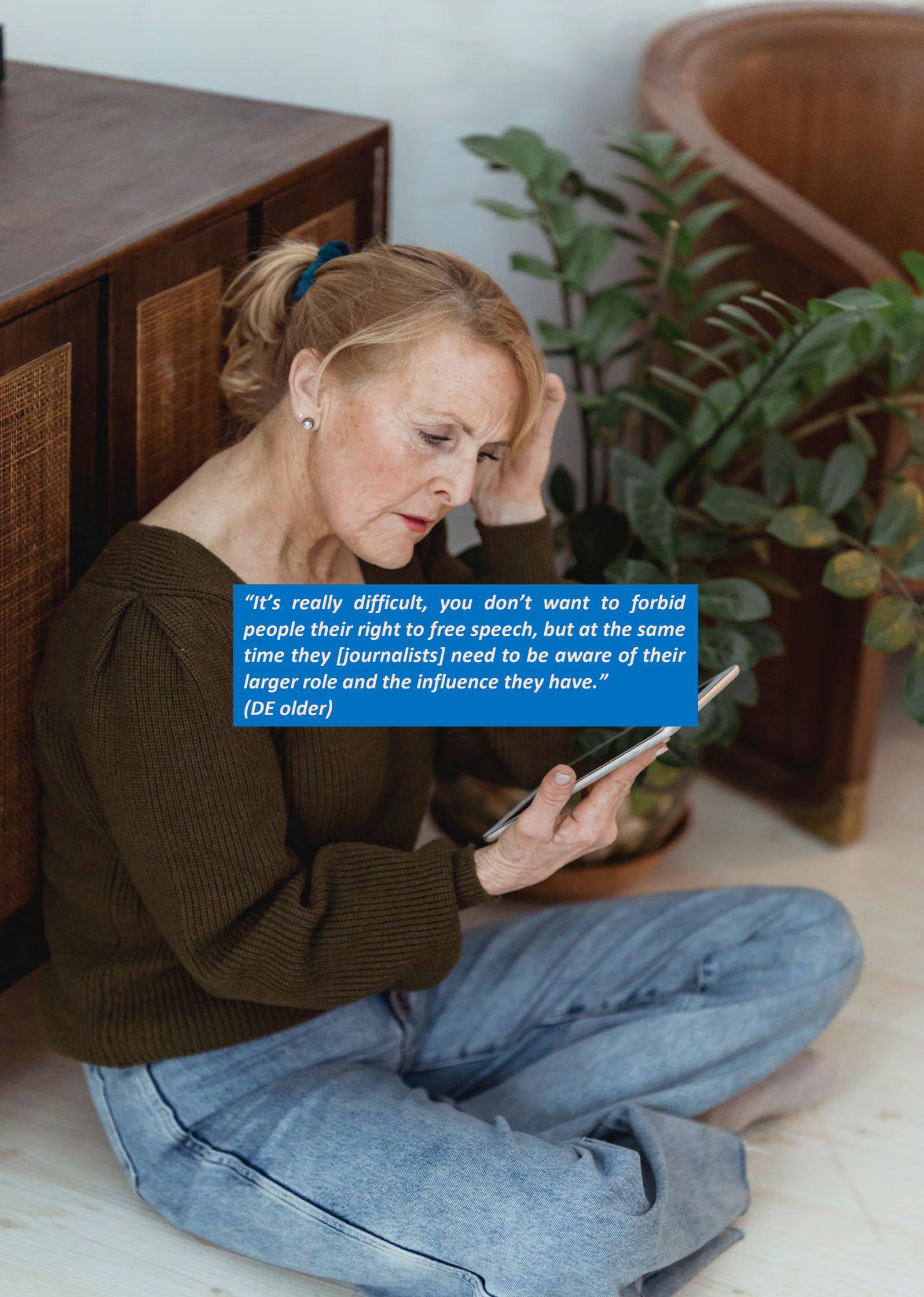
Language is a critical area for news organisations to get right as it can easily be perceived as injecting bias in news reporting. On the whole, audiences want neutrality, but sometimes the enormity of an event requires more active and emotional language. Journalists need to be careful about slipping over into sensationalism or distortion when audiences want impartial news coverage, although more partisan media outlets may deliberately choose language that aligns with their audiences' views.

Language expectations may also shift over time. For example, the *Guardian* has nailed its colours to the mast around the environment and has chosen to use 'climate emergency', which it believes is supported by the science. Thus, the use of language may depend on the business model and aim of the news organisation.

Audiences instinctively recognise and accept that informal formats are more likely to stray from being impartial, whether accidentally or intentionally. It is important that news brands stick to their policy on impartiality and public service broadcasters, in particular, should maintain their adherence to impartiality.

There is a tension between making news more compelling, through emotional reporting, and potentially losing objectivity and trust. The balance for news organisations depends on whether they are trying to appeal to a wider or more niche audience. Formal formats, and political coverage, need to tread more carefully.

Opinion serves valuable roles, from enriching understanding of an issue to providing entertainment, but audiences want it to be clearly distinguished from the facts, which is underlined by the positive view of explainers and fact-checkers. That is more difficult in social media, but digital sources and formats are still evolving and some audiences are learning what to expect from them, which provides some room for innovation and experimentation. That might allow plurality to be delivered across publications or a schedule and not just within an edition or programme. Nevertheless, news organisations need to be clear about their stance on impartiality and stick to it consistently across formats and sources.

A woman with blonde hair tied back in a ponytail with a blue scrunchie is sitting on a light-colored wooden floor. She is wearing a dark brown, ribbed, long-sleeved sweater and blue denim jeans. She is looking down at a smartphone held in her hands, with a serious and somewhat distressed expression on her face. Her left hand is resting against her forehead. In the background, there is a dark wooden cabinet and a large green plant in a pot. A blue text box is overlaid on the image, containing a quote.

***"It's really difficult, you don't want to forbid people their right to free speech, but at the same time they [journalists] need to be aware of their larger role and the influence they have."
(DE older)***

4. The tensions of impartiality in different news topics

What bearing does the subject of the news itself have on audiences' expectations of impartiality? Are there any differences by subject matter, or should all news be treated to the same standard?

Several news stories were examined in order to explore perceptions, experiences and wishes for impartiality. The pieces covered the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, the recent US presidential election, Brexit, and various social justice stories, with comparable local examples used in each country. These subjects range from politics, which inherently has sides, to science, which rests on proven facts and evidence.

Pitfalls in attempts to deliver impartiality, or overlook it, are drawn out across these subjects. Thus, this chapter also considers:

- **False equivalence**
- **Omission and suppression**
- **Market plurality**

Most people pointed out that some news stories comprise just facts. There are no sides and therefore no concerns about impartiality. This fits audiences' core conception of news²⁰. Some felt such news can hardly even be described as a story.

“Opposing views that are equally represented: that is essentially what impartiality is, I believe ... If a dam breaks and floods a valley ... I mean, there is only one view of that really: the dam broke and it flooded, so that is it.” (US older)

However, even in the case of a natural disaster there might be different views about the causes and consequences of the event. Once context and analysis are brought into the mix, impartiality becomes a consideration because audiences believe these added layers can easily slide into opinion. They believe this is more likely with certain subjects, particularly politics, which naturally has sides.

Science and the problem of false equivalence

Stories relating to climate, the environment and coronavirus were used to explore people's perceptions of, and wishes for, impartiality in reporting on science. Some of the examples illustrated the pitfalls of 'false equivalence' in news. This refers to the attempt to provide balance by including, with equal weight, an opposing argument that lacks merit – for example, a piece about climate change (which is scientifically proven) giving equal weight to views that are sceptical about human responsibility for global warming.

²⁰ See model of news in [The layers of news](#) section in Chapter 1.

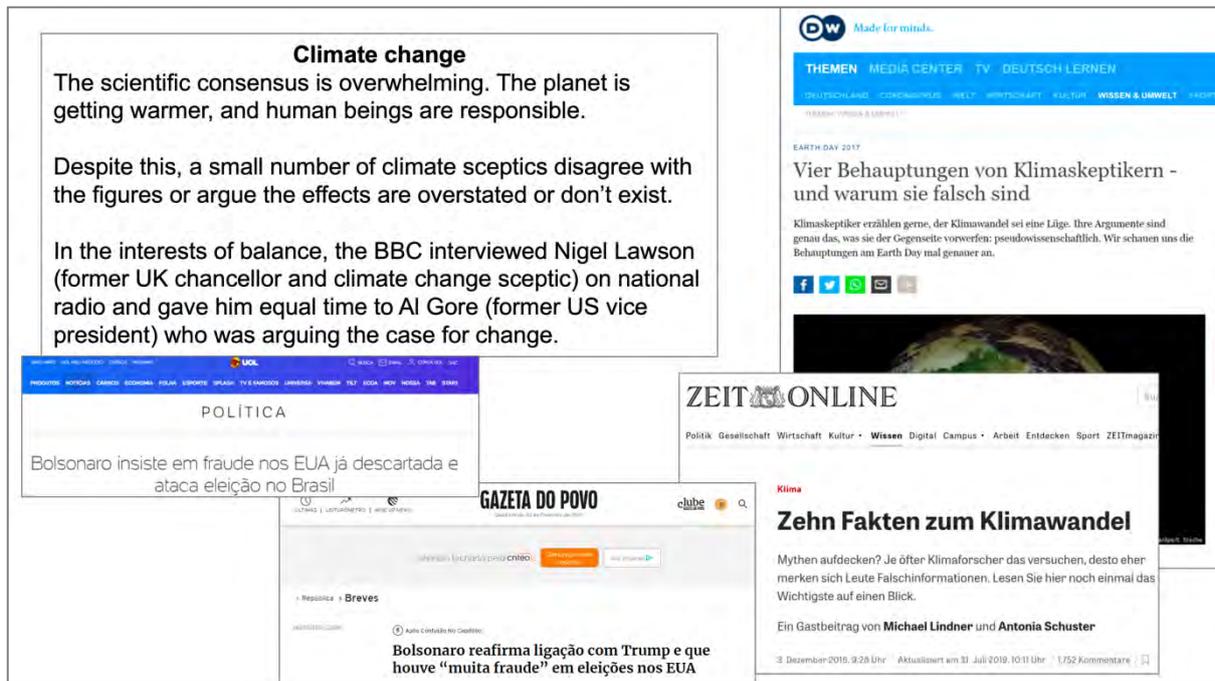


Figure 9: Examples exploring false equivalence in news reporting

Science news seemed to be straightforward to audiences because science deals in evidence and is perceived as being largely free of agendas although, as the COVID-19 crisis has shown, the science sometimes takes time to become clear and this has led to many different interpretations of emerging data. Nevertheless, sometimes scientific information goes against the grain of some people’s instincts – such as the need for lockdowns to slow the spread of coronavirus or the safety of vaccines – and some voices in the media give succour to this scepticism.

The notion of false equivalence was unfamiliar and difficult to digest for many of our participants because it goes against a general audience desire not to suppress a point of view, as well as the belief that people are entitled to their own opinions. It challenges the aversion to omission of different views.

“If they’re bringing facts to the table then you know it’s only right to hear them out and kind of try and understand from their view. That would then make it an impartial argument.” (UK younger)

Many struggled to see the dilemma a journalist might face, believing all points of view should be presented, allowing those with merit to win. For example, on the topic of global warming the science is clear, but audiences were reluctant to shut out a highly sceptical view presented in an article.

However, although initially reluctant to dismiss climate change scepticism, on further consideration some appreciated the impartiality challenge. Science experts and their scientific facts, they argued, should not be undermined by sceptics and deniers armed only with opinions that distort the facts. This is a corruption of impartiality.

“There are cases where there’s no way to see the two sides of the coin. [When] scientists, professionals, experts ... claim that ‘this is the way it is, [we should agree] this is the way it is [and] move on! There’s no way [we should] listen to a person who does not have so much knowledge and give [them] much weight to the subject that the scientist masters.” (BR older)

Nevertheless, many were uncomfortable with the idea of not allowing a contrary view, and they were wary of attempting to rebalance a piece by weighting it to one side. Their argument was that all points should be presented to allow the evidence to reveal the truth of the matter. Rather than ban a point of view, some suggested people could choose not to consume an article.

Politics and the problem of omission and suppression

A selection of local and international political news was used to explore feelings about coverage of politics and reactions to what is and is not allowed. It included coverage that had been cut, and people who had been silenced, which stimulated discussion of the suppression and omission of various stories and views.

For example, some of the US television networks cut away from Donald Trump’s press conference when he made baseless claims about vote fraud. In other examples, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat took down content from Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, and Trump’s Twitter and Facebook accounts were suspended. In Brazil, YouTube banned the channel Terça Livre (which supports Bolsonaro) on the grounds that it violated YouTube’s terms of service. Similarly, in Germany, YouTube banned some prominent political conspiracy theorists. And in an instance in the UK, talkRADIO was briefly removed from YouTube because it posted material that contradicted expert advice about the coronavirus pandemic, although senior government politician Michael Gove said the government's critics should be heard.

Increasingly it is not just editors of traditional publications making decisions over which content is acceptable or unacceptable. Technology companies now make regular judgements about free speech based on their own community guidelines and government legislation that covers their activities²¹. Some commentators in the US accuse them of being partial in this because more of the content they ban is on the political right than the left²².

²¹ The German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) obliges large social media networks to remove content that is “clearly illegal” within 24 hours after receiving a user complaint or face fines of up to €50m.

²² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/mark-zuckerberg-jack-dorsey-trump-gop-section-230-facebook-twitter-google-b1391267.html>



Figure 10: Examples of technology platforms removing news content

Politics is the topic where audiences are most concerned about impartiality. Politics is inherently about different sides and audiences want them all to be represented so that all arguments are given and coverage is fair.

“Particularly in politics, we have all got our own thoughts, opinions and everything else and, if we only hear part of something then they are either exaggerated or pulled-in. Whereas, if we get both sides then we can have a fair, nice, even view of everything that is going on.” (UK older)

“I think with politics you are much more likely to have differing opinions than with other things. Like, let’s say a plane crashing, there is no option, it crashed, but with politics ...” (US older)

In the US many people fear impartial coverage of news is impossible amidst the partisan media and polarisation of audiences. There were also some older Brazilian supporters of Jair Bolsonaro who dismissed objective but critical reporting of his government as biased journalism.

This research reinforces Digital News Report survey data showing that most people value freedom of speech and, on the whole, do not favour any censoring of news and opinion. They prefer journalists to present the evidence and allow it to be debated. They prefer to be allowed to receive all views – even those that are sceptical, unconventional or challenging – and come to their own conclusions²³. Even in coverage of COVID-19 there are many sides to the story: there is collateral damage in lost incomes and in strained mental health and domestic violence, let alone dissenting views of the many measures introduced to combat the spread of the virus (lockdowns, masks, etc), which became politically charged.

²³ See Appendix for the results of the survey.

“I’d never expect the ARD, ZDF or even the Bild newspaper ... to ban or delete a comment as long as it doesn’t break the law in some way ... that becomes manipulative and many people can no longer form an opinion because they have one forced upon them.” (DE younger)

Omission and suppression are considered insidious forms of bias. Their effect is to disempower audiences, and render certain views unrepresented. Much of the discussion related to decisions made by public broadcasters and social media companies in not allowing certain views to appear, despite the platforms and sources supposedly being for everyone.

“I don’t necessarily agree that anyone should ever have their freedom of speech or expression taken away from them.” (UK younger)

In Germany there is concern that a consensual news environment might be driving extreme views underground, where they fester unchecked by civil society and public policymakers and can surface unexpectedly.

“As long as these voices are out there, they need to be heard, the media has a duty to do that. And even if it is antivaxxers or COVID deniers ... as long as they represent a certain proportion of the public, then we have to hear them.” (DE younger)

There is also sensitivity to shutting down views in Brazil, due to the not-too-distant history of dictatorship.

In the United States, one of the most high-profile instances of suppression occurred when Donald Trump was banned from Twitter and Facebook after repeatedly claiming, without evidence, that the presidential election was stolen. Some people questioned the legitimacy of private companies making such consequential decisions, particularly in relation to a democratically elected politician. They believe it better to expose rather than suppress controversial views. Others accept that private social media platforms have the right to remove people on the grounds of breach of their terms of service. Although not ideal, this was mostly not considered a matter of bias or censorship.

“There’s a huge problem with private companies that are in no way democratically legitimised making decisions about what you can see and what you can’t see.” (DE younger)

“Twitter is a private platform. It has rules and if these are broken ... it is possible to be banned. When you go there and click that you are agreeing with the rules, you are following the guy’s rules.” (BR younger)

“If someone is creating real and considerable harm by consciously disseminating lies and misinformation, Twitter are allowed and probably have a duty to [ban people]. The public interest is something different to just suppressing a voice.” (DE younger)

Social justice and different audience views

Stories about different views of certain controversial topics related to social justice were used to explore whether there are some opinions deemed unacceptable and how this sits with impartiality.

Examples included pressure mounted against a *Guardian* columnist and a *New York Times* opinion editor, which in both cases led to them leaving the respective newspapers.

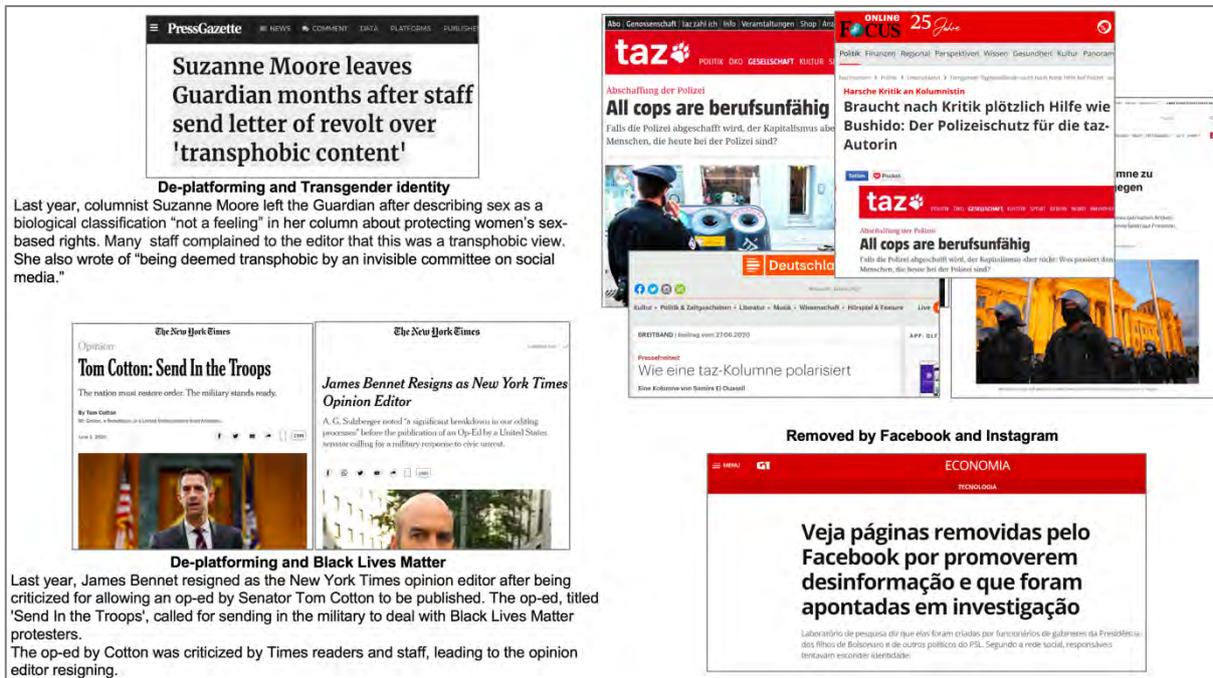


Figure 11: Examples of opinions being silenced

Although generally people did not want viewpoints to be suppressed, there were some issues – such as racism, bullying and hatred – where tolerance for certain views evaporated.

“I feel like it’s kind of difficult to be impartial when it comes to the racism discussion.” (US younger)

“Like, being racist is not okay ... it is not acceptable, so there is no argument there. I don’t need to see both sides, I don’t need someone to tell me that it’s okay to be racist or have racist tendencies, that is not an arguable or balanced topic for me.” (US older)

But some other controversial issues tended to divide audiences, with older people maintaining the imperative not to censor, while younger people displayed more intolerance for views they considered hateful and harmful.

“It’s just as dangerous when you shut people down – even if they are idiots ... Perhaps I personally don’t have to listen to everything? ... Like if it’s something about xenophobia, with all the good will in the world, I can’t subject myself to the opinions of some radical right winger.” (DE older)

“It’s very good to listen to people’s interpretations and their perspectives, but when it starts to affect morality and things that are quite sensitive to people, then it is wrong because there are certain things that he [Trump] shouldn’t say but he says it anyway. And, it is just like, that is so wrong.” (UK younger)

Younger audiences felt a greater editorial filter is required to take account of how people feel about social justice issues, particularly around identity. In one example, the long-serving *Guardian* columnist Suzanne Moore left the newspaper after strong objections were raised by staff over her comments about women and trans identity. In another example, the *New York Times* opinion editor stepped down after criticism by readers and staff that he allowed an op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton calling for the military to be sent to deal with Black Lives Matter protesters.

Many younger people feel that society needs to move on from the past and there should be more sensitivity to views that could be deemed hurtful and harmful to particular groups.

“Society is constantly changing and what is acceptable and unacceptable is always changing as well.” (UK younger)

The use of language can be particularly fraught, as meanings that might not be shared are often deemed to reveal unconscious bias. In these cases, some participants felt that impartiality does not necessarily require neutrality. Thus, they favour silencing certain views that conflict with their own.

Market plurality

Arguably, journalistic impartiality was especially important when there were a limited number of sources of news, but the internet has brought far greater choice. In this context, audiences can get the benefits of impartiality – being exposed to all sides of an argument – by using multiple sources. In this view, a quasi-impartiality is achieved through consumption rather than production, with responsibility shifted from the journalist to the user.

“There are so many voices trying to make a point on so many subjects that the only way [to achieve impartiality] is to make sure you get information on the same subject from three or four different sources.” (DE younger)

Market plurality in a high choice environment like the internet, is further enabled by the recent growth of news aggregators and social media platforms, although it requires a very engaged audience and a high degree of news literacy.

“Because we really do need impartiality, we do need to have sources of information that we can trust, and you will always have two or three sides to the coin and to a situation. So, it is important that as a rational human you are able to absorb and judge credibility and make decisions on your own.” (US older)

While there might be risks in this approach, such as the effort required to consume multiple sources, and the imperfect understanding of algorithms, many people in our group of regular news consumers felt confident about navigating the platforms and sources they use to reach a balanced view. This might not be the case with a less engaged group.

In Summary: The tensions in different news topics

The experience and requirements of impartiality in terms of topic, and some of the pitfalls, are summarised in the table below.

	EXPERIENCE & REQUIREMENTS OF IMPARTIALITY	DIFFERENCES BY AUDIENCE & COUNTRY
Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impartiality required and ought to be straightforward with proven scientific facts, but reporting can suffer false equivalence, e.g. climate change deniers being given equal coverage in name of balance – there aren't always two sides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on audiences' existing biases
Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impartiality imperative in news because politics is about different sides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered in public service tradition of UK & DE • US media and audiences characterised by partisan polarisation • Some Bolsonaro supporters in BR believe news is biased when reporting is critical of the government
Social justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also requires impartial treatment, but, controversially, can be different requirements when values differ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Younger and left-leaning people more likely not to accept certain views in topics such as race • Older and right-leaning prefer all views to be included, even if they are uncomfortable or unpopular
False equivalence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult concept, not really taken on board, although some came around to it • Exclusion of views goes against the grain of free speech and allowing arguments to be aired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier to comprehend in UK & DE with their foundation of impartial public service broadcasting
Omission & suppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The biggest concern about impartiality – free speech important pillar of a free society • Most uncomfortable with silencing people and opinions • Yet also acceptance of private tech platforms, which are not exclusively news sources, taking such decisions when their rules are breached; less acceptance of public broadcasters doing this 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some younger and more progressively minded people accept curtailing free speech when it breaches their moral values
Market plurality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieves a quasi-impartiality through consumption rather than production • But requires great commitment – few actually consult multiple sources to achieve an impartial view 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US model

Across the range of news subjects, politics is the area where audiences are generally most demanding of impartiality. They want all sides to be covered, allowing them to make up their own minds about the news. They particularly abhor the omission or suppression of any side

– as long as the expressed views are within the law – because, in effect, it silences people. This raises serious dilemmas for tech platforms who, in de-platforming people and removing content in accordance with their house rules, are taking decisions about information that exists in the public realm where people want all views represented.

A key issue for both tech platforms and publishers is the fine line between legitimate editing and omission/suppression, on which it may be difficult to balance impartially. While politics naturally has different sides, and therefore the constant risk of bias, some news topics appear to carry less jeopardy in the demand for impartiality. Science, for example, deals with proven facts, which ought to mean avoiding the need to represent opposing views where there is consensus among scientists. Yet scientific topics can often take on a political or economic dimension too (as was seen with coronavirus and vaccines) and the general aversion to excluding views can give rise to false equivalence, whereby opposing views that lack merit (such as climate change denial) are given equal treatment in the name of balance.

Audiences find it easier to repudiate ‘two-sidedism’ in topics that are more familiar and clear-cut, such as domestic violence and racism, where most agree there is no balancing side. Yet, on social issues, perspectives can differ across the generations. Younger people are more likely to take moral positions on issues of social justice where they consider some views are unacceptable and should not be published. They believe confronting the harm caused by certain views trumps the presumption of free speech.

If all these considerations seem too complex, some people (especially in the US) point to the market as the sure source of multiple views, where consumers may in effect construct impartiality for themselves – impartiality through news consumption rather than its production. Market plurality might work as a default for some highly engaged news audiences, but it leaves most behind because of the dedication required.



"Twitter is a private platform. It has rules and if these are broken ... it is possible to be banned. When you go there and click that you are agreeing with the rules, you are following the guy's rules." (BR younger)

5. Impartiality and news audiences

We have shown how perceptions of impartiality can be affected by the source, the subject and the way it is treated, but how do different audiences think about and approach impartiality?

Audience differences

Most people claim impartiality in news is important, but attitudes and behaviours do tend to vary by age, media literacy, political outlook and national regulatory context (as borne out in the survey data²⁴).

- **Age:** Younger people tend to hold different attitudes on issues of identity and social justice than some older and more traditionally minded people. Some prefer news that supports their views and overrides opposing views that they deem harmful.
- **Media literacy:** Those who are savvier with newer digital news sources (social media, aggregators, audio and video formats) are better able to navigate the evolving landscape of news and appear to cast a more critical eye on these sources of news.
- **Political outlook:** Some audiences on the right believe news organisations and journalists should be free to report and comment as they wish, whereas others on the left support progressive representation that stands against positions to which they are opposed.
- **Regulatory context:** The public service tradition and experience of regulation in the UK and Germany, amidst wide availability of opinion, allows people to advocate impartiality in a way that their peers elsewhere cannot envisage. Participants in the US and Brazil hold stronger to the plurality of the market.

Four news mindsets

The research identified four broad attitudes towards impartiality in news, which are differentiated along two axes: digital news savviness, and the degree of anxiety about impartiality in news. The requirements of impartiality vary across these mindsets.

- **Confident:** This mindset avidly consumes news. While believing impartiality to be unachievable in theory, in practice it mitigates biases comfortably by checking multiple sources and working around their limitations. This triangulation approach is facilitated by online search, social media and aggregators. In the UK and Germany, public service broadcasters (PSBs) provide a basecamp from which to explore other sources.

What should news organisations do for this mindset? Provide a wide range of views and give insight into the views of others. Provide links to official data and other resources, to fulfil the news hunting need. Emphasise impartiality to earn respect and trust.

²⁴ See [Digital News Report 2021](#)

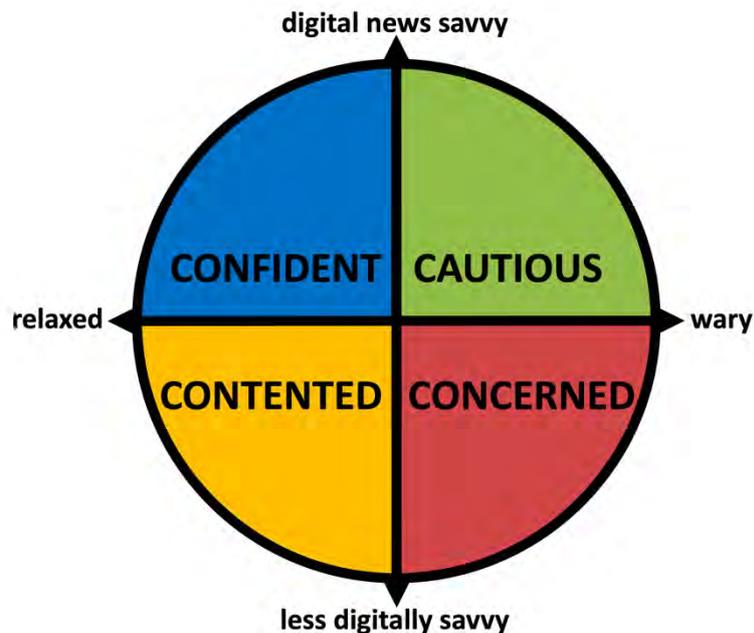


Figure 12: News mindsets

- **Cautious:** Like the Confident mindset, it considers impartiality to be a worthy yet unattainable ideal for any individual news provider, but it is less certain of being able to fashion a quasi-impartiality itself. It is wary of entrenched biases of political and commercial vested interests, including what is missed as well as what is said. In the UK and Germany, the PSBs are generally considered to be more impartial news providers.

What should news organisations do for this mindset? Reassure of impartiality credentials. Provide transparency about journalistic and editorial process. Clearly separate opinions and comment from the facts, context and analysis layers of news.

- **Concerned:** Firmly believing in the importance of impartial news as a vital benefit to society, this mindset avoids sources it considers fall short in order to steer clear of bias and manipulation. It tends to rely more on traditional sources and news brands. PSBs in the UK and Germany are considered safe havens.

What should news organisations do for this mindset? Reaffirm impartiality credentials to cement trust and offset any concern about hidden agendas or political polarisation. All brand touchpoints should uphold impartiality – including on social media. Report on digital news media to demystify it.

- **Contented:** This mindset is happy in the comfort zone of its current news diet. Taking a pragmatic approach, it recognises that not all news should be taken at face value, and enjoys the entertainment and enlightenment of opinionated news. In Brazil, this mindset can be naïvely unaware of being in a biased bubble and is therefore dismissive of some news it perceives as displaying shoddy, rather than critical, journalism.

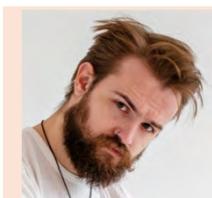
What should news organisations do for this mindset? Provide entertaining comment and analysis, but differentiate this from the facts layer of news. Use social media for enjoyable debate to enhance the experience with other sources. And provide alternative views to extend beyond the comfort zone.

In Summary: Impartiality and news audiences

Impartiality is prized by highly engaged news consumers, although there are some subtle differences by age and outlook. Younger people, who tend to be more digitally literate and have grown up consuming news distributed through tech platforms, are more attuned to the judgments of those platforms and their decisions to remove content, although on the whole most people prefer all views to be provided.

There are also different political outlooks. On the right, people generally favour all sides and opinions being presented, whereas on the left people take a more protectionist stance.

The regulatory environments of the UK and Germany, with their public service traditions, contrast with the US and Brazil, and this explains some of the differences between countries.



Case study: Adam
Younger male
UK (Midlands)

- Main news sources are Twitter and TV
- Watched a lot of TV during lockdown, which provided entertainment as well as information; contented with mix
- Enjoyed Piers Morgan on *Good Morning Britain*, although took much of it with a pinch of salt



Case study: Alice
Older female
UK (South East)

- Traditional approach to news
- Considers impartiality important, and sticks to the BBC; concerned about trustworthiness of news in social media
- Believes news should serve the public interest



Case study: Amelia
Younger female
US (Southwest)

- Wary of bias
- Uses Apple News aggregator and Twitter to access different news brands
- Hopes journalists have integrity



Case study: Adrian
Older male
US (Pacific Northwest)

- Avid news hunter, invests lots of time
- Confident in mitigating bias although believes impartiality is impossible, especially from a single source
- Dismissive of opinionated US news networks as not really news



Case study: Aline
Younger female
Brazil (Northeast)

- Gets news mainly online
- Also uses TV for local news, which is difficult to find online
- Cautious approach, perceiving journalistic bias as something to navigate



Case study: Antônio
Older male
Brazil (Southeast)

- Shifted his habits from broadcast news to apps and websites to get varied perspectives and views in the pandemic
- Wonders what is not being reported



Case study: Andreas
Younger male
Germany (South)

- Actively uses traditional news sources with critical scientific mind
- Social media not reliable for news
- Cautious of vested interest in news



Case study: Anja
Older female
Germany (North)

- Sensitive to propaganda from growing up in Eastern Europe
- Must be critical when consuming news
- But more interested in liberal views

6. Building trust by addressing risks to impartiality

Impartiality is considered an important value in news, albeit alongside the partial nature of opinion. But how does impartiality or lack of impartiality affect trust?

Trust forms in the relationship between news and its audience²⁵. It is forged through people's experiences and expectations of news, which are affected by the levers in the hands of journalists, editors and news organisations – the subject of the news, the source and format, as well the news brand²⁶. The trust relationship also depends on the knowledge, needs and attitudes of the audience. Impartiality can strengthen or undermine trust.

Topic, source, brand

Impartiality is a driver of trust for many highly engaged audiences most of the time, but it is not relevant to everyone all the time. Impartiality is more important in some situations.

- **Topic:** Impartiality is considered fundamental to news about politics, and important in most serious subjects, although once the facts are established there may also be interest in comment and opinion. Impartiality is also important for audiences in topics that are controversial.
- **Source and format:** Audiences anticipate impartiality is more likely in traditional sources, where it contributes to trust in news, but is less certain in new online distributed environments (where trust is often lacking). It is demanded of fact-based news reporting (what, where, when), and of formal scripted broadcast formats, and relies upon journalistic integrity.
- **Brand:** Impartiality is key to trust in news brands governed by impartiality rules, whether their own or externally regulated. This becomes particularly important in social media where the credibility of the environment is less certain. Public service brands in the UK and Germany are built on impartiality and trust comes from their adherence to impartiality guidelines.

"It's trust, trust! You don't have to question them [public broadcasters]. It's easier to trust them and to believe what they're saying without having to check them." (DE younger)

Trust tends to be earned over the long term, but can easily be undermined. It can be damaged when the distinction between opinion and the facts is unclear, let alone when there are

²⁵ The Trust in News Project observes: "trust is a relationship between trustors and trustees".
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/what-we-think-we-know-and-what-we-want-know-perspectives-trust-news-changing-world>

²⁶ See the Reuters Institute's Trust in News Project, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-news-project>. The Trust in News Project comments that "trust often revolves around ill-defined impressions of brand identities and is rarely rooted in details concerning news organisations' reporting practices or editorial standards – qualities that journalists often emphasise about their work."
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/listening-what-trust-news-means-users-qualitative-evidence-four-countries>

inaccuracies, as in the Brazilian example below where newspaper advertisements were accused of contradicting the science about COVID-19.

“I saw at the beginning of the pandemic that large magazines and newspapers [...] sold a considerable part of a page talking about the treatment for Covid with chloroquine, ivermectin, this early treatment. And science has already proven that it was not effective and the mainstream media propagated it. And then, trust collapses there.” (BR younger)

Trust is less associated with social media, which trades on opinion and is designed to carry more than news. Here, both accuracy and impartiality cannot be taken for granted. Impartiality might be assumed to underpin many individual news brands, but it is not a hallmark of the platforms.

There are also times when impartiality might actually undermine trust, where audiences want news to confirm their own biases (as noted earlier among some audiences in Brazil).

Balancing risks to impartiality

Impartiality can fall short in different ways, irrespective of the news story or the source. Impartiality in news requires a balance in the inclusion and exclusion of facts and viewpoints. Tip too far in any direction and impartiality is lost, leaving trust a casualty. There is a place for opinion, but most audiences want it to be clearly signposted and differentiated from fact-based news.

These areas of risk are summarised in the model below.

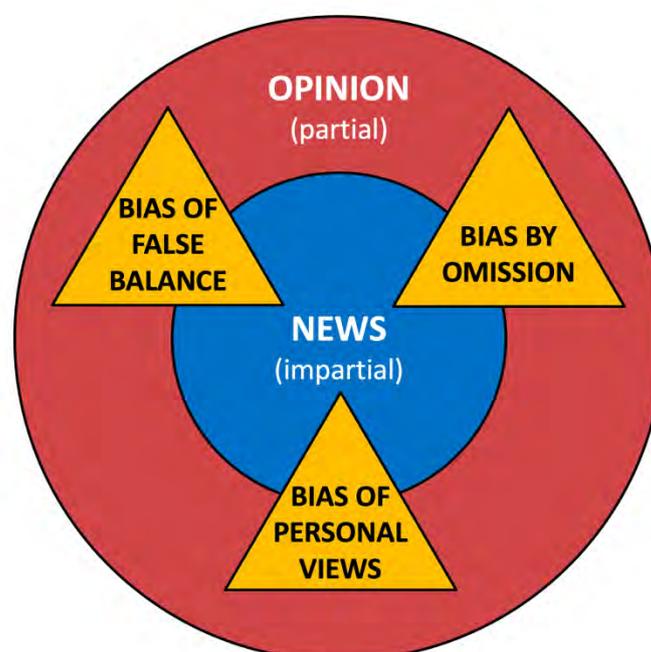


Figure 13: Model of risks to impartiality in news

The risks to impartiality fall broadly in three ways:

- **Bias of personal views:** The views and opinions of the journalist or presenter slipping into the news, be it in what is written/said, or in emotions revealing too much, whether accidental or intentional, conscious or unconscious. This can include getting caught in 'groupthink' where the bias of the bubble of family, friends or colleagues is not noticed.
- **Bias of false balance:** Being unfair through applying the false equivalence of alternative views that have no merit because they are discredited by science or opposed by law. This is a problem of inclusion.
- **Bias by omission:** Not covering a point of view or silencing a voice, which risks people being marginalised and not feeling represented. This is a problem of exclusion. It is the most disliked form of bias because it denies people agency.

In Summary: Building trust

Trust is a relationship between news and its audience, which can be strengthened or undermined by adherence or non-adherence to impartiality, as well as other factors such as accuracy and affinity with a brand. When opinion is demanded and enjoyed, impartiality is of no consequence to audiences, but when the factual layer of news is wanted, impartiality (alongside accuracy) is all important.

Achieving impartiality is a fragile balancing act. Audiences feel it can be wrecked when the personal views of the journalist or presenter seep into coverage, or when discredited arguments are given equal weight in a story in the name of balance – although these situations are not always perceived as transgressions, and can be supported or justified when aligned with audience views.

Of all the risks to impartiality, exclusion is the most troubling to audiences, in part because it is the least obvious breach of impartiality. Over time it can be corrosive of trust, particularly in audiences who feel their views are being suppressed.

While this is experienced more on private tech platforms, it does impact on the traditional media brands that use these platforms to distribute their content, and some people feel it disproportionately affects views on the political right.

Journalists and news organisations need to think carefully about their position in the market, the trust they have built, and how that may be impacted by deviations from impartiality.

*“As long as these voices are out there, they need to be heard, the media has a duty to do that. And even if it is antivaxxers or COVID deniers ... as long as they represent a certain proportion of the public, then we have to hear them.”
(DE younger)*



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLISHERS

Impartiality

Engaged audiences in the four countries researched care about impartiality and say it helps define news, even if some consider it an impossible ideal. They want journalists to be obsessed by facts, objectivity and fairness, and to steer clear of opinions and bias in reporting, leaving them to decide for themselves how they feel about the news. Alongside accuracy, impartiality is a foundational value of news that underpins audiences' trust.

While not all news organisations aim for impartiality across the range of their output, audience concerns about fairness and inclusion of a range of views need to be considered – especially in news coverage, and especially by those looking to build trust with mainstream audiences.

The role of opinion

While impartial news is cherished, opinion is valued as well – along with background context and analysis. Once informed by the facts, engaged audiences say they want to be exposed to a range of views that shed light on different perspectives, allowing them to judge the merits of the arguments. Opinionated pieces help them make sense of the news and form their own views. They also confirm people in their views, thus representing the diversity of audiences' interests. Audiences say that opinion can also make news more interesting. However, the distinction between news and opinion all too easily dissolves when impartiality is compromised, particularly in social media.

In this context, the news industry needs to strive more clearly to separate news from opinion, especially in a digital context where it can be hard to identify different types of content at a glance. Labelling should be clear and obvious within websites/apps and, in particular, within distributed platforms such as social media. Publishers should take great care with analysis where the distinction between news and opinion easily blurs.

Informality and the expression of emotion

Across countries, newer digital formats such as social media are perceived as carrying more risk of bias along with the growth of more informal and entertaining broadcast formats such as chat shows and podcasts. Impartiality is more vulnerable in these contexts, as well as when the news is emotive or controversial, because journalists' personal views risk slipping out in the impulse to engage, although the subject and intention have a bearing on how audiences feel about this. This needs to be gauged carefully to retain impartiality.

Although the breadth of content on social media, and the comments they attract, can amount to a proxy for impartiality, some people feel that the underpinning algorithms in social media and online news aggregators risk creating news filter bubbles of narrowly selected content, further challenging impartiality.

News organisations need to be aware of the risks around more informal news formats. Those news organisations that aim to be impartial need to be particularly careful about how

reporters and editors use social media, where even subtle expression of personal opinions can be perceived as taking sides, and bring reputational damage.

News brands cannot ignore new formats and distribution channels, given the high levels of audience demand and engagement. Training staff to be aware of the risks and to adhere to guidelines is a good starting point.

Country differences

Audiences find the risks to impartiality vary by subject matter and source, too, albeit inconsistently across countries and people. Different countries' news traditions shape people's experiences and expectations. Audiences in the US cannot envisage a world without partisan news outlets, but in the UK and Germany, with their public service traditions, most audiences still laud the upholding of impartiality.

In Germany, some people wonder whether their more consensual political environment leads to suppression of some viewpoints. In Brazil, some supporters of Jair Bolsonaro fail to recognise impartial reporting and consider any news critical of the president to be biased, despite the facts, thus illustrating the complexity of the concept. Impartiality is considered most important in politics, which naturally has different sides, but other topics may have political dimensions, too.

The national contexts in which news businesses operate continue to hold sway, but some publishers looking to build audiences elsewhere may need to consider different audience expectations around impartiality.

Inclusion and exclusion

Audiences' greatest concern is the omission and suppression of viewpoints. They instinctively dislike perspectives being excluded because they feel it marginalises and silences people. There are particular misgivings about this in Brazil and Germany, where past dictatorships frame people's views.

Some people make an exception for tech platforms that remove content for breaching house rules on the grounds that as private companies they need not take a neutral stance. Older audiences and those on the political right, though, tend not to be keen on this form of censorship, which taps into debates about tech platforms taking editorial decisions.

Publishers and tech platforms should be more transparent over their policies around difficult issues like inclusion and exclusion, false equivalence, and the fine line between legitimate editing and suppression. More effort is needed to explain and communicate decisions. None of this is easy, however, as rulings can easily be misinterpreted by special interest groups in social media, which can cause further reputational damage.

Age differences

When it comes to issues of social justice we do find significant age differences, with some younger and politically left-leaning people preferring news to reflect their own views. They may advocate suppressing certain opinions on moral grounds, believing the perceived harm caused by an opinion can often trump the presumption in favour of free speech. Yet, when it

comes to other topics, such as climate change and COVID-19, which deal in scientific facts, the presumption to expose all views returns, rendering the notion of false equivalence difficult to fathom.

News brands need to decide how to balance adherence to strict facts with moral and ethical positions, particularly on controversial social issues where perspectives can differ across generations. Beyond democracy and racism, there is a range of issues where age differences are creating new and difficult dilemmas for editors around impartiality, requiring careful handling of both audiences and staff.

Continuing relevance of impartiality for different publishers

Amidst political polarisation in many countries and the flood of online content, impartiality is at risk. It is a value easily lost, but this research shows that for most people it remains an important underpinning of audience trust in news.

While our audience mindsets show that some ‘confident’ users can create their own quasi-impartiality through combining different sources, there are others who have ‘cautious’ and ‘concerned’ mindsets that still rely on specific news brands to provide a range of views on important stories.

In view of this, many mainstream brands, including public service broadcasters in countries such as the UK and Germany, will want to maintain or even strengthen their adherence to impartiality and communicate this commitment to audiences. They should consider – as many already have – updated guidelines for staff on the need to separate news from opinion, and on the risks to impartiality of operating in more informal formats such as social media. This renewed commitment to impartiality may not always win the biggest audiences but it will be important to maintaining trust. In the light of coronavirus and other big stories, tech platforms, too, are looking to promote content that is widely trusted and represents a range of views. This could in turn drive greater reach for impartial brands.

Other news organisations may choose to emphasise partial or opinionated reporting, deliberately choosing language that aligns with their audiences’ views, alongside formats that are more emotive and engaging. Our research suggests that this will appeal to certain engaged audiences, especially on issues of social justice or climate change. However, even here, audiences across countries expect a range of views to be represented.

Journalists and news outlets increasingly will need to decide where they stand: the facts layer of news, bound by accuracy and impartiality, versus opinion; and alignment with younger people’s attitudes on moral issues versus reporting all views with impartiality.



"Society is constantly changing and what is acceptable and unacceptable is always changing as well." (UK younger)

APPENDIX

*Digital News Report 2021 impartiality questions and data*²⁷

[Q_IMPARTIAL1_2021] Thinking about the news in general in your country, when news outlets report on social and political issues, which of the following comes closest to your view?

- News outlets should reflect a range of different views and leave it up to people to decide
- News outlets should argue for the views that they think are the best
- Don't know

[Q_IMPARTIAL2_2021a] Thinking about the news in general in your country, when news outlets report on social and political issues, which of the following comes closest to your view?

- There are some issues where it makes no sense for news outlets to try to be neutral
- News outlets should try to be neutral on every issue
- Don't know

[Q_IMPARTIAL3_2021] Thinking about the news in general in your country, when news outlets report on social and political issues, which of the following comes closest to your view?

- News outlets should give equal time to all sides
- News outlets should give less time to sides they think have a weaker argument
- Don't know

²⁷ Data commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Research was conducted by YouGov using an online questionnaire at the end of January and beginning of February 2021. Samples were assembled using nationally representative quotas for age, gender, region, and education. In the US and UK, we also applied additional political quotas based on vote choice in the most recent national election. The data in all markets were also weighted to targets based on census/industry accepted data.

Most people think news outlets should reflect a range of views

Selected countries



Q_IMPARTIAL1_2021. Thinking about the news in general in your country, when news outlets report on social and political issues, which of the following comes closest to your view? Base: Total sample in each market: All markets = 92,372, USA = 2001, UK = 2039, Brazil = 2009, Germany = 2011.

Most people think news outlets should give equal time to all sides

Selected countries



Q_IMPARTIAL3_2021. Thinking about the news in general in your country, when news outlets report on social and political issues, which of the following comes closest to your view? Base: Total sample in each market: All markets = 92,372, USA = 2001, UK = 2039, Brazil = 2009, Germany = 2011.

Most people think that news outlets should try to be neutral on every issue

Selected countries



Q_IMPARTIAL2_2021a. Thinking about the news in general in your country, when news outlets report on social and political issues, which of the following comes closest to your view? Base: Total sample in each market: All markets = 92,372, USA = 2001, UK = 2039, Brazil = 2009, Germany = 2011.

Methodology and sample design

A deliberative journey through five stages of fieldwork, combining online diary sensitising tasks and recorded Zoom sessions, supported by a collection of stimulus materials to explore impartiality.

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5
Diary pre-task via app	2x online groups (>2h, 5-8 per group)	Deliberation post-task via app	1x online workshop (>1.5h, 4 participants)	2x online depth interviews (>0.5h)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants noted news consumed over three days Used different sources on final day to draw attention to platform etc Then reflected on their behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explored grounded attitudes, beyond impartiality as a concept Gradually exposed to varied examples to test expectations of impartiality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflected on issues covered in group Opportunity to consider news of choice through lens of impartiality Considered their expectations of journalists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select participants reconvened Now sensitised to give considered feedback Explored issues raised previously Deepened thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select participants reconvened Individual deep dive interviews Represented range of views

Figure 14: Stages of research

- Participants all regularly consumed news (at least x3 per week) and had mid-high interest in ‘hard news’ (e. g. politics, current affairs)
- Mix of news sources/platforms, formats and brands used across sample
- Spread of political leaning left to right (BR: pro vs anti Bolsonaro government) but extremes excluded
- Demographic spread: mix male and female; age spread within 20–34, 35–60, and corresponding mix of life-stages; social grade/income spread; ethnic/racial mix reflective of country
 - DE: included some born outside current borders of Germany and with different ethnic backgrounds (Brazilian, Russian, Turkish, Ukrainian)
- Some geographic spread achieved
 - BR: Aracaju, Cotia, Florianópolis, Guarulhos, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Santo André, São Paulo capital and state, Sergipe
 - DE: Berlin, Bochum, Cologne, Dresden, Feldkirchen, Hamburg, Leipzig, Munich
 - UK: Cornwall, Derbyshire, Enfield, London, Nottinghamshire
 - US: Atlanta, Austin, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Seattle
- Excluded people close to research, marketing, news organisations, big tech, and politics
- The fieldwork was audio/video recorded and participants were given a monetary incentive

A total of 52 people took part in the research, in one or more stages of the study (14 in Brazil, 14 in Germany, 11 in the United Kingdom, and 13 in the United States).

The fieldwork was conducted from 11 February to 5 March 2021 across the four countries (11-22 February in the United Kingdom, 18–26 February in the United States, 18–28 February in Germany, and 24 February to 5 March in Brazil).

Homework tasks

Questions were completed online before and after the first discussion as part of the sensitisation and deliberation process.

Pre-discussion questions

1. *In your view, how do the different news sources and news formats compare? What are their strengths and weaknesses for news? Which do you prefer, and why is that?*
2. *What aspects of news coverage are important to you, and what do you believe journalists should have in mind when reporting news? What do you feel are the principles of good journalism? What makes you trust the news you follow, and how do you judge its trustworthiness?*
3. *Do your thoughts differ by the type of news? For example, do you have different expectations of news about politics versus reporting of health issues, or compared with news from the entertainment industry? Do you hold them to different standards? Where do the principles of good journalism matter more, and why?*

Post-discussion questions

1. *Please share your thoughts about the points that were raised. How important is it for journalists and news outlets to provide news that is impartial? When is it particularly important? Are there some situations where it's less important or even unhelpful?*
2. *Please read/watch/listen to some more news today on one of the subjects we covered (politics, COVID-19, climate change) – or chose a different subject that is important to you (e.g. a social justice issue). Examine the ways the news is presented to you and tell us about the ways in which you feel it is – or is not – impartial. Summarise the news story and where you got it. Does impartiality in that news story matter to you? What did it get right, and what (if anything) do you feel it should have done differently?*
3. *Now imagine you're a journalist developing news stories and reporting the news. You want to be successful, reporting accurately and attracting a large audience. How do you think you should address the issue of impartiality? What role should it play? What should be done in practice?*

Country stimulus packs

Brazil

This grid contains 26 numbered slides for Brazil. Slide 1 is the title slide 'Lançamento - Stimulus' with sub-points: Apresentação Global, Demografia Global, Oportunidade, and Desafios/Impulsos. Slides 2-7 cover 'Impulsos - COVID-19' and 'Respostas do Brasil a COVID-19'. Slides 8-14 focus on 'Lançamento do pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos do pacote de estímulo'. Slides 15-21 discuss 'Respostas da indústria de serviços ao pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos da indústria de serviços ao pacote de estímulo'. Slides 22-26 cover 'Respostas da indústria de manufatura ao pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos da indústria de manufatura ao pacote de estímulo'.

Germany

This grid contains 26 numbered slides for Germany. Slide 1 is the title slide 'Stimulus - COVID-19' with sub-points: Apresentação Global, Demografia Global, Oportunidade, and Desafios/Impulsos. Slides 2-7 cover 'Impulsos - COVID-19' and 'Respostas da Alemanha a COVID-19'. Slides 8-14 focus on 'Lançamento do pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos do pacote de estímulo'. Slides 15-21 discuss 'Respostas da indústria de serviços ao pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos da indústria de serviços ao pacote de estímulo'. Slides 22-26 cover 'Respostas da indústria de manufatura ao pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos da indústria de manufatura ao pacote de estímulo'.

UK

This grid contains 26 numbered slides for the UK. Slide 1 is the title slide 'Lançamento - COVID-19' with sub-points: Apresentação Global, Demografia Global, Oportunidade, and Desafios/Impulsos. Slides 2-7 cover 'Impulsos - COVID-19' and 'Respostas do Reino Unido a COVID-19'. Slides 8-14 focus on 'Lançamento do pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos do pacote de estímulo'. Slides 15-21 discuss 'Respostas da indústria de serviços ao pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos da indústria de serviços ao pacote de estímulo'. Slides 22-26 cover 'Respostas da indústria de manufatura ao pacote de estímulo' and 'Impactos da indústria de manufatura ao pacote de estímulo'.

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